Local & Regional Food Systems: What is the Difference and Why is it Important?

Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development Webinar

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Background and regionalism

- 1992 NESAWG established as a12-state regional food systems network
- Some early thinking on regional food systems in early ‘90s (“food shed”)
- NESAWG’s “Regionalist Approaches to Farm and Food Policy”
- Farm Bill Agenda and successes
- NESAWG’s current working paper, RLT project, conference

Other contexts

- Institutional structure -- models
- System optimization -- efficiencies, competitive advantage
- Land-use decisions
- Northeast culture and experiences

Regionalism framework

- Based on assumption that regions are different
- Responds to regional characteristics, differences and needs
- Encourages regional approaches and solutions
- Guards against “one size” approaches and disadvantaging

Regions

- Boundaries are fluid and nested
- Defined by physical, socio-economic, cultural and political features
- Food systems are “geographically fixed” to regions; place-based
- Ex.: Cape Cod, Mid-Atlantic, Northeast Kingdom, Northeast, “Tri-state”

Language conundrum

- Recent popularity of “local,” “local food system,” and “buy local”
- Resonance and cache for consumers, retailers, policymakers: good
- Different scale definitions of ‘local”
- Conflated with direct-market, small, sustainable, fresh

Language conundrum

- Co-optation by national/global agri-business
- The “local trap” – ascribing attributes
- “Buy Local, Buy New England”
- “Local and regional food systems” -- interchangeable or different?

<u>**Regional food system**</u>

- Local is part of regional; necessary but not sufficient
- Regional is “1,000 points of local” -- but more
- Regions evolve; scale correlates with task
- Nested – within and across state boundaries
- Intra-regional and inter-regional transactions
- It Takes a Region…

Regional food system definition

An ideal regional food system is one in which as much [good] food as possible to meet a population's food needs is produced, processed, distributed and purchased at multiple levels and scales within a region resulting in maximum resilience, minimum importation and significant economic and social return to all stakeholders in the region.

Four dimensions

1. Food supply
2. Natural resource sustainability
3. Economic development
4. Diversity

1. Food supply

- NY State production could support 20% of state' s food needs (Peters, Wilkens, and Fick 2007)
- Greater Philadelphia food system short 40% of acres needed (DVRPC 2010)
- Food security: research needed in regions to determine amounts that can be produced
- Expand geographic area e.g., Good to Grow, Eastern Seaboard project

2. Resource sustainability

- Land-use decisions made with no analysis of food and water needs
- Local control that favors development undermines an area’s food security
- Local food transport most times uses more energy than a larger system
- Many resource management initiatives are regional e.g., Chesapeake Bay Commission

3. Economic development

- Need multiple market options, new business models, branding, infrastructure, financing, and trade
- Three types of alternative chains -- face to face; spatial proximity; spatially extended (Marsden)
- Product differentiation by place and attributes
- Regionally scaled infrastructure in most efficient locations
- Appropriate trade

4. Diversity

- Diversity in types of farms, soils, climates, and crops
- Larger region likely to have more crop diversity especially if crosses latitudes
- Diversity supports flexibility and resiliency e.g. climate change
- Need diverse scale of food chain components
- Resource efficiency

Values

- Stewardship
- Equity
- Opportunity

QUESTIONS / COMMENTS

Implementation: NESAWG conference

- Importance of networking at regional scale and with regional framework
- Circulated working paper
- Cross-sector, cross-state, cross-discipline
- Formed working groups: distribution, research, messaging, infrastructure, access, planning and food safety

Implementation:

NESAWG conferees address challenges

- “Regional” competing with or usurping “local”
- Lack of resonance with the public (compared to “local”)
- Avoiding the “regional trap”
- Regional is not just spatial; also defined by values, scale and culture
- Policies and parochial politics undermine regional efforts

Implementation:

Regional Lead Team (RLT) Project

- Focus on regionally focused food value chains (RVC) in 12 Northeast states
- Learning community of RVC leaders and researchers
- Identified and surveyed 35 entities
- Two-day workshop with Northeast Sustainable Traders
- Written report with maps available at www.nefood.org

Implementation: RLT framework

- Each RVC has a “driver”
- Located in the region (some or all chain partners)
- Includes aggregation/distribution (i.e. not direct-to-consumer or direct wholesale)
- Handles “significant volume” of differentiated products
- May have, or strive for, “green” practices and “values-based” business relationships

Findings: goals of RVCs

- Support local/state producers
- Provide environmental benefits through farming
- Provide local food for local businesses

Driver principal function

- 13 are distributors
- 8 are producers; 8 are processors
- 4 are retailers
- Most drivers play several roles; half play at least 5 roles

Foods produced or handled by RVC drivers

- Only dairy or produce: 6 each
- Mix of foods = 10
- Others: meat, seafood, grains/bakery, full line retail

Descriptive information

- Range of gross sales: $140,000 - $110 million
- Range of employees: 1- >100
- 18 hybrids; 15 non-hybrids
- Number of accounts of processors: 40-200
- Number of growers in the processor chains: 1-100
- Number of growers in distribution chains: 15-300

Product attributes

- 50% handle certified organic
- 10 chains -- no rBST
- 7 chains grass fed; 5 chains no antibiotics
- 20 use "local"; several use "regional"

Values-based elements

- About 1/3 RVCs said they have open relationships
- About ½ offer decent prices to farmers
- About ½ maintain farmer identity through the chain
- In about 25% of RVCs farmers are involved in decision-making

Top five challenges

- Managing growth
- More supply
- Getting farmers to understand market needs and their new roles
- Oversimplification of “local” by retailers
- More customers

Policy and technical assistance

- Food safety procedures
- Food safety regulations
- IT needs
- Organizational and product development

Going well

- Good relationships among partners
- Demand high and sales are growing
- Farmers getting good prices
- A lot of new interest

Where chains are in the development process

- Desire to work at bigger scale, to be regional, go across state(s)
- Need more supply
- Need better understanding by farmers of volume and quality stores need

Research questions

- Learn more about drivers' multiple roles and hybrid chains
- How are "local" and "regional" understood and used along a chain
- Barriers experienced or perceived by farmers to participating in RVCs
- What are roles of alternative vs. conventional retail buyers re RVCs
- How do we examine the "soft fabric" of RVC relationships
- Study different stages of development

RVCs: next steps

- Compile existing RVC research → collaborative research agenda
- Address technical (e.g., logistics) and TA needs
- Foster future networking and organizing

QUESTIONS / COMMENTS

Thank you!

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