Building Community Food Webs
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Introduction

Chapter 1
The Extractive US Farm Economy

Although US population and spending power have increased steadily, net farm income has declined dramatically. Farmers were far better off a century ago. While farmers earned 40 cents from every dollar of sales in 1910, net income from producing crops and livestock has fallen to Depression-era levels. Farmers now earn only one penny from each dollar they sell—a decline of 98 percent. In the country that claims to "feed the world," more of our food is imported than ever before. The economic structures that divide farmers from consumers systematically extract wealth from our communities. Each era in which farmers have won significantly more sales has led to further decline, not a more sustainable agriculture. Over time, the thrust of farm policy shifted from supporting market mechanisms to compensating farmers for the fact that markets were fundamentally unfair.

Chapter 2
Co-learning Is Contagious

Amid the farm credit crisis of the 1980s described in chapter 1, a small cluster of Montana farmers realized that the markets they had depended on were broken, their soil was depleted, and their souls were hungry. Tilling remote fields far from political power centers, they were unsure of how to move forward. They approached AERO (Alternative Energy Resources Organization, based in Helena, Montana), an alternative energy initiative they belonged to, asking what it could do for farmers. The growers made the case that farming, because it harnessed solar energy, would fit the organization's mission. AERO very wisely responded by saying they did not have an answer. But AERO agreed to convene small groups of farmers and researchers who could experiment in their own ways, exploring new crops, new markets, and better ways of building soil health. To foster this work, AERO raised funds to provide small grants to these grassroots experiments. This evolved into a statewide network of collaborative learning clubs that engaged in more than 200 research projects initiated by hundreds of rural Montanans. By inserting more pulses (edible legumes) into crop rotations, farmers nourished their soils and tapped new global markets. Innovative ways of controlling pests were devised and tested. New food businesses formed. This in turn sparked national change. Montana became one of the first groups to help expand a Buy Fresh Buy Local initiative that had been launched from Pennsylvania. The national FoodCorps program was born in Montana. The very term "community-based food system"

was also invented by one insightful Montana leader. Building on this foundation, a food-processing center located in Ronan, a town of 2,000, fostered new regional collaborations and also became a national leader.

Chapter 3
Invoking Traditional Wisdom to Recover from Plantation Agriculture

The imposition of the plantation system in Hawai'i disrupted ancient food systems that had protected precious water and ecological health for centuries, but also transformed a society that had effectively fed itself into a state that is deeply dependent on food imported from thousands of miles away. This created immense disparities of wealth that would not have been tolerated in traditional society, fueling social isolation and ill health. Then the plantation system itself collapsed, victim to its own dependence on fickle global markets. The last remaining plantation ceased operations at the end of 2016. As contemporary Hawaiian leaders addressed the consequences of this imposition, they discovered that traditional cultural insights helped bring society back into balance. Health care centers, food banks, and researchers now foster traditional ways of building mutual trust, centered upon farming, gardening, cooking, eating, and cultural celebration in ways that rekindle a spirit of 'āina (respect for the land) and healthy lifestyles. Traditional farms have been brought back into production as the core of both public health initiatives and formal degree programs. A health center serves traditional foods at its cafeteria. Subsidized food shares convey fresh fruit and vegetables directly to low-income residents, and traditional crops have been brought into commercial production. Food and health professionals encourage SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) enrollment because of the critical contribution these funds make to the state economy. Health workers and professors collaborate to bring new youth into farming. Food system leaders collaborate through statewide action networks that span the archipelago, advocating for state policies that promote food production by family farms for Hawai'i residents living at all income levels.

Chapter 4
Building the Capacities and Voice of Low-Income Residents

As the US strove to "feed the world," SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefit allocations soared sevenfold, from $7 billion to $64 billion (all figures in 2017 dollars) over the past 50 years. America has essentially exchanged solid farm income for widespread poverty. Food-relief sector workers know that short-term food donations are critical for people's survival and health as long as inequalities exist. Still, food banks are increasingly using food donations as only the first step in building a more empowering relationship with their constituents. In Tucson, Arizona, a nationally respected food bank focuses on building economic opportunity for its constituents and breaking down the isolation low-income people experience. As this work has matured, food bank officials increasingly engage low-income constituents in the planning and management of food bank programs. Gaining new voice and visibility, some have been inspired to launch new businesses, to strengthen student

success and neighborhood support networks through gardening, and to run for office to change municipal policies.

Chapter 5
Placing Food Business Clusters at the Core of Economic Development

Taking advantage of two regional strengths in Northeast Indiana, economic developers launched a strategy of connecting nationally visible food manufacturers with the commodity farmers near them, hoping to build greater wealth in the region. However, the food processors saw little reason to collaborate regionally, because they focused on national markets and viewed each other as competitors. Looking for new approaches, the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership asked a team of consultants to assist. When developers viewed our maps showing the support networks that family-based farms had already built to engage household customers in purchasing from their farms—and how effectively these farms had already networked with each other—the developers turned greater attention toward supporting these farms as a cluster of local businesses. Yet the maps also held potent unexpected insights. As strong as the collaborations were among the emerging farmers, most of their food was shipped to distant metro centers, and little was available to lower-income neighborhoods. So the partnership expanded its work to address these issues as well. Through separate channels, the developers also came to realize that the economic growth of their region required new immigrants. They began to market their region as an attractive place to live, largely by ensuring that high-quality, locally raised food was available.

Chapter 6
The Cradle of Food Democracy: Athens (Ohio)

Building community networks was also the core of an economic development approach taken by a cluster of newcomers to Athens, Ohio, who moved into a community together because they viewed it as a place that was open to change. As in Northeast Indiana, these leaders paid close attention to their constituents and learned significant new insights from them. Yet they focused on lower-income residents from the beginning. Now, after nearly 50 years, Athens is (along with the Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center in Ronan, Montana discussed in Chapter 2) one of the two leading centers in fostering food-business development in lower-income areas. The Athens cohort began by launching worker-managed food businesses. Two of these still thrive today. As low-income residents expressed their lack of interest in group ownership, however, the original animators redirected their efforts to incubating new entrepreneurs. Leveraging antipoverty grants, they created ACEnet, which runs a food-processing center where aspiring business owners can create new value-added products. Over time, ACEnet expanded its attention to nearby Nelsonville, opening a shared woodworking shop, office space, and warehouse facilities.

Chapter 7
Metro-Area Farmers Need Supportive Networks

In several communities, efforts to support local farmers are just beginning to take root. One such metro area is Phoenix, Arizona, where development pressures are intense. In 2017, the Maricopa County Food System Coalition asked us to document the networks that their community foods initiative in Phoenix has built over the past few years. They were looking for some way to capture the attention of civic leaders who had not yet grasped the import of community foods efforts. Our interviews documented that the county had several exceptionally accomplished produce farms and a strong heritage of food production. There were ample markets, with residents purchasing $12 billion of food every year. A private food distribution firm had dedicated itself to selling Arizona foods locally, and tried to coordinate farmers' production. But farmers felt isolated, and civic leaders seemed to imagine no future for farming in Maricopa County. Developers owned much of the productive farmland. By showing city officials network maps that portrayed the farmers' isolation, the Coalition evoked a strong response. City officials are now convening with farmers and launching campaigns to encourage more Phoenix residents to eat food grown on Maricopa County farms.

Chapter 8
Municipal Officials Collaborate to Protect Metro Farmland

Cities were founded close to farms, so productive lands are deeply threatened as metro areas expand. Not only have millions of acres been taken out of production, land prices have soared to levels far higher than working farmers can pay. The intense pressure for development can polarize communities. When two farmers in Brighton, Colorado, challenged civic officials to protect agricultural lands, both city and county staff rose to the challenge. Collaborating unusually closely, they absorbed considerable public criticism and invited fierce opponents to testify publicly. Individual interviews with landowners holding diverse views also helped identify a strategy to reduce the conflict. A design firm offered innovative options, rather than new restrictive policies. In the end the two municipal governments invested heavily in protecting two key properties, knowing this action would not protect all the farmland but would establish a richer sense of place that would set a new tone for the future. The City and County purchased two farms at their development value to reserve the land for agricultural use. Taking this action eased tensions. Now this rural district is being rebranded according to its agricultural heritage, and developers are invited to respond to that civic vision. None of this could have happened without a network of collaborators embracing a tense situation with great openness to build trust.

Chapter 9
Working Below the Radar to Create Networks of Green Space

Dakota County, Minnesota, has also experienced an intense loss of farmland, but core rural traditions remain embedded in the community fabric. Several farm families trace their roots through generations, and township governments still control zoning decisions. Development also allowed the County to garner the resources required for long-term planning to protect

green space. Environmental leaders living across the Twin Cities metro area, informed in part by community foods activity, forged a broad vision for fostering water quality in the Mississippi River watershed 35 years ago. Knowing the river serves as its eastern border, Dakota County rose to the challenge. One county official worked quietly to implement this strategy, building support from the township level up to county commissioners. Public investments have centered on protecting water quality, preserving wildlife habitat, improving soil health, and fostering recreational opportunities. By acting strategically, this evolved into an extensive network of green corridors. Developers were initially skeptical, but they now embrace these corridors as amenities that add value to nearby properties. Now the County is turning closer attention to fostering innovative agricultural practices and protecting farmland for agriculture.

Chapter 10
Building Market Power for Farmers

Farmers typically sell the commodities they produce at prices well below the full costs of production. They cannot sustain this; family farms in the US will not survive unless they build greater market power. Some have invented creative ways to step out of the commodity trap and connect directly with consumers. Iowa organic growers negotiated successfully with a grocery chain for a period of time by building loyalty with their customers. Seven siblings in Indiana constructed an innovative farm that reaps exceptional profits by grazing livestock intensively and selling directly to household customers using the farm's original software package. One organic farmers' cooperative in Southwest Wisconsin invited their principal buyers to join their co-op board to ensure greater mutual loyalty. Still, lasting market power for farmers depends on building a culture of collaboration and ultimately, effective public policy.

Chapter 11
Shifting from "Local Food" to "Community-Based Food Systems"

Many communities find that their efforts to build "local" food opportunities become co-opted by businesses that uphold values inconsistent with local decision making, building local wealth, or stewardship of the environment. In addition to being simplistic, the term "local food" refers to the attributes of a given food item—How far did this tomato travel?—rather than the more systemic issues: What type of food system brought food to us? What is its impact? What kind of food system do we want to build? Framing this work as building community food systems is more effective.

Chapter 12
Scale Is Both the Problem and the Solution

Many growers and food businesses are facing intense pressure to expand their production to meet larger markets. Yet large-scale systems have created many of the problems we face

today; growing in size will not resolve them. Getting larger also applies new pressures and new intricacies. Community food webs build on the unique qualities of each region. Right-sizing the work for individual firms must balance the appropriate scale for the community itself. The best approaches find ways to share the advantages that larger firms enjoy with smaller firms, and to keep communications open.

Conclusion

Building Community Food Webs: Active Networks, System Levers, and Business Clusters

At the heart of every effective community food web is a group of people who trust each other. They share information openly, discuss differences respectfully and honestly, and learn together over time. They learn even from their mistakes, and they value new insight over perfection. They wrestle with four essential tensions, striving for balance. They try to move system levers that will create larger impacts and nudge complex systems to better places. They cluster complementary businesses in ways that retain wealth within their communities.