

Bridging Farm and Table: The 'Harvest to Market' Innovation

Highlights from a Social Venture Innovation Challenge Winner

Andrew Walters and Edie Allard

Buying food locally is a goal to which many consumers aspire. Local produce is likely to be fresher than food shipped from hundreds or thousands of miles away, less shipping means less reliance on fossil fuels, and local farmers receive the benefits of local spending.

But what makes sense in theory can be difficult in practice. Try, for example, to find and purchase a locally grown carrot. In the traditional food system, local farmers and buyers have trouble connecting. A consumer seeking to check off a lengthy shopping list with local

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produce will have to identify and then travel to many farms, since most farms produce only a few types of food. Farmers have few marketing resources, and a farmer's base of individual customers tends to be restricted to the most conscientious buyers who live within a reasonable driving distance. In the end, many small farmers resort to typical distribution channels that involve numerous levels of shipping, processing, and handling, and the consumer buys at the supermarket. One result of our reliance on this food

distribution system, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Dollar Series, is that only 17.2 cents of every dollar spent on a farmer's produce goes to the farmer.

Harvest to Market is a new online platform that makes it easier for small farmers to sell their products directly to local consumers. It provides the infrastructure required to make possible an efficient marketplace.

Consumers visit the Harvest to Market website (harvesttomarket.com) and find "markets" in their area. A market in this virtual context is a group of one or more nearby farms that collaborate online under the guidance of a coordinator called a market partner. The market partner, who can be a conscientious consumer, a farmer, a member of a local agricultural organization, or any other engaged individual, creates a web page for the online market using the Harvest to Market website and tools. Farmers can also customize web pages for their own farms.

Potential customers—which can be schools, restaurants, and institutions as well as individuals—can search for nearby markets and browse through the available produce as listed by the farmers. The market partner then determines, in collaboration with the community, how the food can be distributed most effectively. Options range from the establishment of single pickup locations to home delivery.

About the Social Venture Innovation Challenge



The Social Venture Innovation Challenge invites individuals and teams from across the state of New Hampshire to identify pressing social and/or environmental issues at the state, national, or global level, and then find an innovative business-oriented approach to solving them.

The Challenge is organized by the Center for Social Innovation (CSIE) and is a joint venture between **CSIE**, the **Paul College of Business & Economics**, **Carsey School of Public Policy**, **UNH Sustainability Institute**, **NH EPSCoR**, **UNH Innovation**, and **Net Impact UNH**.

About the Center for Social Innovation and Enterprise

The Center for Social Innovation and Enterprise offers innovative pedagogy, applied research, and meaningful engagement opportunities for students and faculty from across the University of New Hampshire in "social innovation"—the application of market-based and cross-sector strategies to develop sustainable, scalable solutions to societal problems.

As a joint venture of the **Peter T. Paul College of Business and Economics** and the **Carsey School of Public Policy**, this interdisciplinary Center contributes to the growing field of social innovation by working at the nexus of individual entrepreneurs and business models with public policy and systemic change in our research, teaching, and practice.



Harvest to Market currently hosts approximately 23 active online markets throughout Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. The website acts as a catalogue of all online markets and individual farms, allowing potential buyers to search for exactly what they are looking for and to support local farms in the process.

One quality that allows Harvest to Market to work among many different communities is its flexibility. The website provides the platform for enabling transactions, but the farmers, users, and market partners can alter the process to fit their own community's needs and capabilities. The pickup location can be a school, a parking lot, a community center, a home, or any other central location. One Maine-based market collects and delivers all online orders in a pickup truck. Those responsible for organizing and transporting the food are often volunteers, but some markets price their commodities to allow workers to receive a percentage of the sales.

An example of an online market is Monadnock Menus, a nonprofit initiative operating through the Cheshire County Conservation District. The market encompasses the products of three dozen farms and delivers to businesses, schools, restaurants, and other institutions. Sara Lovitz, one of the coordinators of Monadnock

Menus, said that her role would not be possible without the resources provided by Harvest to Market.

"Without...this platform, it would be very difficult to coordinate the logistics, to do the billing, and to allow both the buyers to know what's available locally and the sellers to reach that many customers in an easy way," Lovitz said.

But regardless of the variations and customization that the platform allows, Harvest to Market promotes a singular vision for all participants—"Know your farmer, buy local, make the connection."

Harvest to Market was inspired in large part by the demand for more and larger farmers' markets, where a variety of farmers gather to sell directly to the end user. Farmers' markets solve some of the economic challenges farmers confront by eliminating the inefficient costs of other distribution channels and by offering a marketing opportunity to potential new consumers. But buyers can't purchase from the farmer when the market is not in session, and before traveling to a market there is no way for a buyer to know exactly what's available or how much a product will cost. For farmers' market vendors, deciding what to bring is a challenge all of its own.

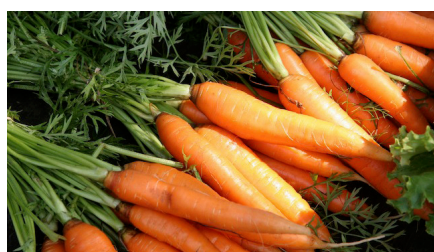
Harvest to Market works in tandem with participating farmers' markets to work around these

shortcomings. For example, a market partner can create an online page for the farmers' market that allows vendors to list the foods they have available and even take orders beforehand. Of course, an online system like Harvest to Market can sometimes cut into the in-person connection that a farmers' market provides, but together the two can improve upon each other.

Community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs represent another important step toward community backing for local farmers, but, like farmers' markets, they don't address the whole range of distribution challenges farmers face. In CSAs, consumers purchase a "share" of a local

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farm before the growing season begins, and these investors then receive a seasonal box of produce every week throughout the farming period. The arrangement helps farmers' cash flow by providing them with funding early in the season, it helps cultivate



a relationship between the farm and the community, and it transforms the way food is provided to the consumer. But consumers can't easily complete their shopping lists using this system. The contents of the basket the farmer delivers is usually random or falls into broad categories (for example, vegetables, fruits, meat), and farmers still need more efficient distribution channels to sell their produce throughout the growing season. Harvest to Market can act in tandem with CSAs to support farmers all year round.

Harvest to Market's capabilities and methods are continually being developed, and the support of local communities and institutions has been essential to its growth and success. In 2014, Harvest to Market placed second at the New Hampshire Social Venture Innovation Challenge. The \$5,000 prize provided more than just needed capital; it was accompanied by new ideas for the improvement of Harvest to Market as well as contacts for business consulting and financing. A \$4,000 grant from the Cheshire County Conservation District has also provided crucial support for Harvest to Market's ability to turn its aspirations into reality.

As it grows, Harvest to Market has the ability to have a transformative impact, encouraging local people to eat local food and encouraging small farmers to keep growing healthy produce. The exchange nurtures the connection between farmer and consumer.

In February 2016, Harvest to Market launched a new website with a simplified design and faster loading times that improve the experience for vendors and consumers. A new mobile layout recognizes the fact that people are as likely to shop from a smartphone as from a desktop computer.

New features are always in development, in response to requests from both consumers and farmers. One would allow a buyer to save the virtual shopping cart after the web page is closed; another would allow instant messaging between users and tech support.

As for volume, in the coming year Harvest to Market hopes to expand the value of transactions from the current \$500,000 to \$3 million.

However, these upgrades and expansions will not be accomplished without challenges. Harvest to Market's team of web developers is devoted but small, and at present some markets on the website exist only as placeholders, without full online ordering capabilities. The marketing capabilities necessary to attract new users are limited at present. But once the website is fully established and key features are added, Harvest to Market will be able to spread its flexible platform.

As it grows, Harvest to Market has the ability to have a transformative impact, encouraging local people to eat local food and encouraging small farmers to keep growing healthy produce. The exchange nurtures the connection between farmer and consumer. Positive changes like this could be crucial for communities where fresh, local food is especially hard to come by. Moreover, a well-run farm brings with it health and environmental impacts that can change *any* community for the better. Multiplied thousands of times across the country, the same changes can have an even more substantial impact. A new website is only an early step in that process. Such growth will take the effort of people who care and who have the skills to turn thoughts into actions.

About the Authors

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