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Community-Based Food Systems in Michigan: Cultivating Diverse Collaborations from the Ground Up

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Community-Based Food Systems in Michigan: Cultivating Diverse Collaborations from the Ground Up

Abstract

This article discusses the results of a Michigan project to forge partnerships between Extension and diverse teams of community members to enhance development of local food systems. The project provided training and resources for teams to utilize food system work as a community problem solving tool. Such efforts have great potential to address a host of public health, economic, and land use issues.

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Introduction: Community-Based Food Systems

Nearly everyone can support local food or community-based food systems (CFS): increasing the capacity of local food systems provides direct economic benefit, as well as a wide range of secondary benefits. Fostering greater consumption of locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables can yield significant gains in jobs and personal income (Cantrell, Conner, Erickcek, & Hamm, 2006; Swenson, 2006). Recent research also suggests that CFS offer integrated solutions to a wide array of chronic and related problems in public health, economics, and land use (Conner & Levine, 2007). Given their broad potential benefits to multiple constituencies, developing CFS makes sense as educational and community development programs for Cooperative Extension.

CFS can be defined as collaborative efforts to build more locally based food systems and economies (Peters, 1997). CFS prioritize local resources and local markets, emphasize social equity and environmental sustainability, and rely on relationships among growers and eaters, retailers and distributors, processors, and preparers of food within the community (Heller, 2005). "When local agriculture and food production are integrated in community, food becomes part of a community's problem-solving capacity rather than just a commodity that's bought and sold," (Heller, 2005, p.5).

Project Description

A recently completed project, led by the C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems at Michigan State University, assisted Extension professionals in efforts to develop CFS partnerships in their

communities. Key outcomes of the initiative were the creation of local food teams in 13 Michigan communities (Figure 1) and a cadre of MSU Extension (MSUE) educators incorporating CFS work into existing Extension programming.

The project centered upon using the food system as a problem-solving tool to address issues ranging from health to food access and economic opportunity. It was built upon two main principles and assumptions: respect for local knowledge and assets; and diversity of partnerships. Rather than prescribe solutions, the project used food system development as a rallying point to create community food teams that identified and addressed issues specific to their communities.

The teams drew a great diversity of members, including Extension educators from agriculture, nutrition, and entrepreneurship programs, as well as community members with agriculture, health, economic and community development interests. In Michigan and elsewhere, diverse multi-stakeholder initiatives are increasingly seen as effective tools for identifying and developing economic opportunities within the food system (Wright, Score, & Conner, forthcoming).

Figure 1.

Map of Community Food Teams: Cheboygan, Chippewa, Food System Economic Partnership (FSEP), Ingham, Kalamazoo, Kent, Mackinac, Montmorency, Muskegon, Northwest Michigan, Presque Isle, Saginaw, Van Buren-Berrien



An initial organizing retreat marked the project's beginning. The goal for each team was to leave the retreat with an action plan to address specific issues that affect the sustainability of its local food system.

Teams continued to communicate directly and share information with one another throughout the project. Structured activities included:

- Site visits in four communities provided opportunities for team members to share the projects with local legislators and other community members.
- A listserv was initiated and used extensively to share information.
- Frequent conference calls allowed teams to share their progress and barriers implementing their original plans and facilitated policy collaboration.
- A second retreat, held 1 year after the first retreat, served as a learning exchange: teams shared in-depth experiences, outcomes, future plans, and policy activities.

Discussion

Eleven of 13 teams remained intact and actively engaged throughout the project. The specific accomplishments of the groups are as varied and diverse as their memberships, but each involved strategic relationship building within each component of the food system, which helped to increase local food availability. The project's full report (Cocciarelli, 2006) provides greater detail of the teams' efforts and accomplishments.

Several groups and efforts lacking strong leadership and commitment from Extension floundered; in contrast, many of the most successful and dynamic groups had vital input from Extension educators who managed to carve out time or make it part of their jobs to engage with the community teams.

Perhaps the most valuable part of the project was the networking among and between community members. Many people came to the original training feeling that they were working in isolation. Through the training gatherings, site visits, a listserv, and conference calls, they met a host of kindred spirits. Communication among community groups added a sense of both legitimacy and empowerment to their efforts. A number of spin-off projects have resulted from these partnerships.

Conclusions

Diverse, multi-stakeholder collaborations, engaged in developing CFS, have great potential to contribute to a broad set of community development issues concerning nutrition and health, economic prosperity, and land use. We hope this article encourages and guides efforts of other Extension Educators to forge partnerships in their communities.

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