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Kim L. Niewolny

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, niewolny@vt.edu

Eric Bendfeldt

Virginia Tech, ebendfel@vt.edu

Joyce Latimer

Virginia Tech, jlatime@vt.edu

Lorien MacAuley

University of Maryland, Global Campus, Lorien.macauley@faculty.umgc.edu



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Cover Page Footnote

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Model of Community, Local, and Regional Food Systems Extension Programming

KIM NIEWOLNY¹, ERIC BENDFELDT¹, JOYCE LATIMER¹, AND LORIEN MACAULEY²

AUTHORS: ¹Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. ²University of Maryland, Global Campus.

Abstract. Community, local, and regional food systems (CLRFS) programming reflects important issues and priorities that intersect with Extension and the sustainability of our food system. CLRFS programming in Extension, however, is still developing slowly while food movements grow nationally. This article describes a CLRFS model and complementary process for conducting listening sessions with Extension professionals and community leaders to develop and enhance CLRFS programming to address critical food system needs. A recommendation for Cooperative Extension is that such a tool may aid CLRFS program potential as an integrated “food, farm, and health” approach for community-level application.

INTRODUCTION

Interest in local, regional, and community-based food systems has increased rapidly over the past several decades. These systems are understood differently by scale and scope across geographical and cultural spaces. The authors draw upon systems thinking to illustrate how community, local, and regional food systems (CLRFS) is a valuable organizing concept for interdisciplinary programming. The work of CLRFS is centered on values (Niewolny et al., 2016a) that inform the type of food system we envision, organize, and sustain. The coronavirus (COVID-19) raises serious concerns about the sustainability and equity of traditional supply chains and global markets. CLRFS work reflects important issues and priorities that intersect with Extension’s core mission and the food system. Using a values-centric and systems-thinking approach, Extension is well positioned to develop CLRFS initiatives that are responsive to critical community needs through community-based programs (Thomson et al., 2011; Colasanti et al., 2009), facilitation (Raison, 2010; Bendfeldt et al., 2019), professional development (Bloom et al., 2017), and national networking (CLRFS, 2020). While some Extension systems have started to develop CLRFS programming, Extension has the opportunity to do more to create and enhance thriving, justice-focused, and resilient place-based food systems.

Virginia’s Extension community is committed to CLRFS programming. Starting in 2015, Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) launched a committee from Virginia Tech and Virginia State University to organize CLRFS-related Extension activities. This group coordinated a statewide forum to build capacity for statewide coordination (Niewolny et al., 2016a). The forum was centered on the VCE CLRFS model, which enabled VCE professionals and partners to identify and further enhance their CLRFS work (Niewolny et al., 2016b). Building upon the success of the forum, the CLRFS committee used the model to conduct nine listening sessions to further develop statewide CLRFS programming. The model and listening session findings were incorporated into new CLRFS resources and professional development opportunities.

Since the forum and application of the CLRFS model, VCE CLRFS programming has grown. In 2018, the committee evolved into the first ever VCE CLRFS Program Team to better address statewide needs for interdisciplinary food systems research and programming. In 2019, based on needs assessments and listening session recommendations, we launched the Virginia Tech Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation. This Extension/Outreach center works at the nexus of food, agriculture, and society through a values-based systems approach to explore and catalyze the conditions for a more socially just and sustainable food system. Drawing upon this timeline and programming experience, this article frames the application of the VCE CLRFS model as a tool for CLRFS programming and provides recommendations for other Extension systems to develop and enhance

CLRFS programming. We suggest that such a tool is foundational for building collective CLRFS understanding, partnerships, and action in our Extension systems.

MODEL OF COMMUNITY, LOCAL, AND REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS

The three-tiered VCE model for CLRFS (see Figure 1) was designed to illustrate how community, local, and regional food systems are multifaceted and reflective of social, economic, and ecological systems and values. The model helps Extension professionals identify the values driving their CLRFS work, which is critical in making programming decisions. The model's design also allows Extension professionals to see how they can catalyze community change through different action-oriented processes and functions.

The inner dial of the model uses a community-based focus to incorporate food value chain thinking (University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension Community Food Systems Framework, 2020; Lamie et al., 2013) to show how the food system is not linear but comprised of interconnected subsystems. Extension and community-based professionals often orient their programming and research using value chain thinking; therefore, this is a useful starting point to frame what CLRFS programming can look like and how it connects to the other systems. The outer dial of the model draws upon the Whole Measures for Community Food Systems as principles for creating a resilient and equitable food system. This includes the goal of developing socially just, economically vibrant, and ecologically sound food and farming systems embedded in local needs, people, and places (Abi-Nader et al., 2009; Hamm, 2009). These values-based impacts illustrate two points: first, that CLRFS Extension work is values-driven; and second, that the values of fairness and justice are foundational aspects of CLRFS programming. The arrows illustrate action-oriented and systems-thinking (Niewolny & Archibald, 2015; Senge et al., 2015; Snowden & Boone, 2007) to account for the different ways Extension faculty and partners can support CLRFS programming through processes, activities, and functions across the food system. Together, the model operates as a dial at each level to illustrate different forms of alignment from a systems perspective.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUILDING CLRFS PROGRAM CAPACITY

The VCE CLRFS model played a pivotal role in the growth of VCE CLRFS programming in Virginia. The authors recommend using the model as a basis for engaged dialogue with Extension professionals across program areas to learn about the interdisciplinary and values-based nature of CLRFS programming. The questions we posed as prompts for use with the model during our statewide listening sessions continue to offer guidance in professional development and action planning. What follows summarizes our process and provides suggestions for CLRFS program application in our Extension systems.

The VCE CLRFS program team conducted nine listening sessions using a purposeful sampling approach to recruit 72 participants in 2017. Each session lasted two to two and a half hours and were held in all four VCE districts, on Virginia State University and Virginia Tech campuses, and during two conferences. Participants included Extension agents and specialists in all program areas, Virginia Tech and Virginia State University faculty with an Extension affiliation, and community stakeholders who collaborate with Extension for CLRFS research and programming. Community stakeholder participants (n=18) included agency professionals, nonprofit partners, and farmers who were present during the Virginia Farmers Market Association and Virginia Farm to Table conferences. Extension participants were recruited through an internal Extension listserv, while community stakeholders were recruited through invitation by conference planners. The purpose of the listening sessions was to create a space in which Extension and community professionals could learn from each other about the CLRFS programming initiatives that VCE is leading and/or contributing to in their communities.

Participants were shown the CLRFS model to frame the initial dialogue. Participants were prompted to discuss their work in relation to the model's different dials and areas and then were asked to discuss how their work could be better supported for sustained growth. The prompts were as follow:

- What are the primary issues you are involved in that fall within the model and under the CLRFS umbrella?
- Who do you partner with to address these issues and how?
- What are the skills, knowledge, or processes needed to be successful in this work?

Model of Community, Local, and Regional Food



Figure 1. VCE model of community, local, and regional food systems.

- If you could name anything, how can Extension leadership better support your CLRFS work on the ground?
- If Extension were to develop a statewide CLRFS program, how do you see yourself participating in it?

Following our Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved protocol, session audio was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to create a report for Extension leadership. The VCE CLRFS program team continue to use these and similar prompts with the model in professional development trainings, publications, and a virtual “Come to the Table Potluck” discussion series to further develop and evaluate CLRFS programming.

SUMMARY

The CLRFS model and listening session prompts serve as a tool to aid CLRFS program development. We present this work as a “good practice” for Extension units to begin developing interdisciplinary and values-centric programming that connects food, farming, and health needs and issues. We recommend using these resources in response to today’s critical food system needs.

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