



Working towards the Common Table: How Vermont Addresses Social Justice and Food Access with Local Food and Why it Matters

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ABSTRACT

Hunger and food insecurity are growing concerns in the United States and around the world. Consequently, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) designated Global Food Security as one of the five focal areas for the National Institute for Food and Agriculture. Recently, the USDA released a report indicating that 13.6% of Vermonters are food insecure (up from 9.6% in 2004-2006) and 6.2% are hungry (“very low food security”) compared to the national averages of 13.5% food insecure and 5.2% hungry (Nord, Coleman-Jensen, Andrews, & Carlson, 2010). At the same time, farmers in Vermont are struggling. The average net income of Vermont farms according to the USDA’s 2007 Agriculture Census was \$22,816/year. This indicates the financial risk associated with agriculture and the challenges that Vermont farmers face in achieving business viability.

Unconnected strategies that either enhance food access or build economic success for agriculture may work at each other’s expense. Hence there is a growing need for efforts that simultaneously support access to high quality, local food for low-income Vermonters while ensuring fair return to Vermont farmers. Approaches driven by this dual-goal have great potential to strengthen communities and further social equity, both important tenets of sustainable agriculture.



KEY FINDINGS

- Local food plays an important role in increasing the quality of food provided through federal, state, nonprofit and community programs targeting the underserved and in diversifying the market for Vermont farmers.
- Incorporating local food in food access efforts addresses the social justice dimension of agricultural sustainability. While Vermont is a leader in this area, further research is needed to identify best practices that achieve the dual goals of enhancing food security while strengthening farm viability.

Background

Hunger and food insecurity is an area of growing concern in the United States and around the world. Consequently, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has designated Global Food Security as one of the five focal areas for the National Institute for Food and Agriculture. According to the USDA, 13.6% of Vermonters are food insecure, up from 9.6% in 2004-2006, and 6.2% are hungry (“very low food security”). This compares to the national averages of 13.5% food insecure and 5.2% hungry (Nord, Coleman-Jensen, Andrews, & Carlson, 2010). As the cost of food and the numbers of underemployed continue to rise, many Vermonters are forced to make difficult choices. Purchasing inexpensive, unhealthy food may be the only way for them to afford other basic necessities such as heat, transportation, or medicine.

At the same time, farmers in Vermont are struggling. The average net income of Vermont farms recorded in the USDA’s 2007 Agriculture Census was \$22,816/year. In fact, the majority of Vermont farms gross less than \$50,000/year (USDA, 2009). As a reference point, families of four living at 100% of the federal poverty line earn \$21,200 (JFO, 2009). This indicates the financial risk associated with agriculture and the challenges Vermont farmers face in achieving business viability, and also explaining the need for so many farm families to have a source of off-farm income, despite the long hours they invest on the farm. While the local food movement has provided access to an expanding market for Vermont producers, many farmers are still not able to secure a reasonable standard of living for their families through farming alone.

It is possible that simultaneous efforts to enhance food access and further the economic success of Vermont agriculture, if conducted separately, could cancel each other out. This is most likely to occur when food assistance programs that focus solely on

providing inexpensive food sourced from the national commodity system reinforce that system, or when programs that exclusively support the establishment of high cost, value added Vermont food products do nothing for the food insecure. While these programs have important places in the Vermont food system, there is a growing need for efforts that simultaneously support access to high quality, local food for low-income Vermonters while ensuring a fair return to Vermont farmers. Efforts driven by this dual-goal have great potential to strengthen Vermont communities and further the social justice agenda.

Culture, identity and the dual nature of localism

Assertions are frequently made that the local food movement is for the well-to-do. The focus of these assertions is typically on the higher cost of local food. While cost is certainly a significant variable in food choice, there are likely other factors at play. Food has long been thought of as a way that people assign identity to themselves, both personally and as part of a group or subculture (Bisogni et al, 2002.) How we use food to define our identity is both stable and dynamic over time, and is shaped by life experience. Occupation, employment, and other group associations (including social class and other distinctive community identifiers) have been shown to be an important factor in shaping an individual’s relationship with food, and their food choices (Bisogni et al., 2002; Devine et al., 2003).

These associations determine the type of food we eat, but also the ways in which we get our food. For example, farmers’ markets, food cooperatives, natural foods stores and community supported agriculture (CSAs) are venues where local food is sold to some consumers. The purchase of local food through these venues has been conceptualized in a variety of frameworks including food sheds (Kloppenber, Henrickson, & Stevenson, 1996), civic agriculture (DeLind, 2006; Lyson, 2004), community food systems (Feenstra, 2002), and food citizenship (Wilkins, 2005). In a

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more recent framing, McEntee (2010) calls this type of consumer engagement in local food systems contemporary localism. The term is used to describe a distinct set of values held by these consumers related to freshness, health, and localness of food (McEntee, 2010). Consumers who make food and shopping decisions based on these values sometimes self-identify as localvores.

Defining localvores as contemporary accomplishes one thing that other frames do not: It allows us to contrast the values of this group with those of another, lesser discussed group of localvores. Traditional localvores, according to McEntee, make food and shopping decisions first and foremost based on what food is affordable and easily accessible. They may employ similar strategies to acquire local food, such as gardening, hunting and fishing, as some who practice contemporary localism. But traditional localists are likely to be more reluctant to shop at places that are associated with wealthier socio-economic groups. To illustrate this social exclusion, McEntee writes, “—there might be a cultural element of contemporary localism involved, which (is) responsible for the exclusion of these lower-income patrons, thus reaffirming assertions that the contemporary local food movement is restricted to middle—upper class people” (McEntee, 2010, p. 786.)

There are several reasons why advocates for the sustainable agriculture movement should take heed of the distinction between contemporary and traditional localism and the implications such division holds for social justice and sustainability. First, Hinrichs and Allen (2008) argue that the local food movement has descended from and is an integral part of the modern sustainable agriculture movement in the United States, and as such is obligated to actively address social justice concerns. If their premise is accepted, then programming that supports the interests of contemporary localists should also encompass the needs and concerns of traditional localists. To do this, issues related to food availability, access and utilization (food security categories that are commonly used in international work), such

as affordability for low income citizens, must be addressed.

Second, it can be argued that by diversifying the customer profile of local farms, agricultural economies become more resilient to global and national economic fluctuations, thereby protecting the wellbeing of agriculturally based communities. The low income market is a relatively untapped source of income for small and medium sized farms, and can potentially add to the financial viability of the local food movement.

Lastly, by including both sets of localist concerns in outreach efforts, we seek to provide opportunities for community interaction (especially among groups that may co-exist but not have strong relationships), and opportunities for reflexive decision making by consumers that leads to increased skill sets for sourcing and producing food, as well as food selection practices informed by a health perspective. As the local food movement grows, its success will be determined by the degree to which it opens the door for integration of new information and social values, as framed by the needs of specific communities (DeLind, 2002; Lyson, 2004).



Efforts underway

The following section reviews select efforts that integrate local food values with programming designed to increase food access for low income Vermonters. The programs reviewed include:

- Federal food access programs and related incentive programs: Farm to Family, Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program and Harvest Health;
- State, non-profit and community collaborations: Farm to School efforts; and
- Non-profit hunger relief organizations: The Vermont Foodbank Gleaning Network and Kingsbury Farm;

While we do not describe these programs in detail in this review, we evaluate them based on the following criteria:

- 1** Does the effort create economic opportunity for Vermont farmers that lasts beyond the tenure of the program?
- 2** Does the effort increase access to nutritious, locally produced food for low income Vermonters?
- 3** Does the effort enhance sustainability in the Vermont food system (by empowering farmers to keep land in agricultural use, by contributing to the economic viability of the Vermont food system, and by addressing social justice concerns?)



The criteria are necessarily vague: it is not possible or desirable to evaluate the efforts described below by common metrics because of their great diversity of their impacts. Therefore, our evaluation of the following programs is to show federal, state, and philanthropic commitment to meeting the dual goals of food access and farm viability.

In addition to the programs described here, many others address one or both of these goals. Specifically, grassroots or community organizations have great ability to address these issues on a localized level. They are not included in this review, however, because they are so variable that generalizing them would only misrepresent their individual missions. We have selected the following examples because they represent a diversity of foci (supporting supplemental fruit and vegetable consumption through direct markets, food in schools, emergency food supply, or community and volunteer efforts) and funding sources (federal, state, and philanthropic.) While varied, these programs have common themes and characteristics that make them useful for this analysis.

Discussion

1 Does the effort create economic opportunity for Vermont farmers that lasts beyond the tenure of the program?

Though lengthy and involved impact assessments are often seen as a luxury, it is difficult to understand the long term effects of programs without such assessments. For example, programs such as Farm to Family, Senior Farmers' Market Coupon Program and Harvest Health are designed to increase low income Vermonters' attendance at Vermont farmers' markets, but they require more research about the long term purchasing behavior of benefit recipients. Studies show that incentive programs, such as the Harvest Health Program, have long-lasting effects when (a) the primary barrier to accessing local food through farmers' markets is consumers' limited food budget, and (b) when they are coupled with educational information that is relevant to the concerns of their target audience (Stern, 1999). It is important and necessary to conduct impact evaluation of the efforts to increase local food purchasing through incentives.

Other programs are difficult to assess because of their diversity. For example, there are almost as many variations on the farm to school model as there are schools. Some programs place more emphasis on curriculum than local food purchasing. If there is an emphasis placed on creating a long term relationship between farms and school food service, then there is potential for long term economic benefit to farms. If local food purchasing is not a priority of the school or school food service, however, it is unlikely that relationships between the school and local farms will have a significant economic impact on farm viability.

The Vermont Foodbank programs, including the Gleaning Program and the Kingsbury farm, have varying degrees of impact on farm viability. Farms do not currently generate income or tax credits for produce donated through the Gleaning Program, therefore participation in the program does not contribute tangibly to the financial side of farm viability. On the

other side of the coin, the farmer tenants of Kingsbury Farm grow enough food on their land to supply area food shelves as well as sell products for profit to area consumers. By creating the opportunity for these farmers to use the land at Kingsbury Farm, the Foodbank has facilitated the financial viability of at least one farm business.

2 Does the effort increase access to nutritious, locally produced food for low income Vermonters?

While the Farm to Family, Senior Farmers' Market Coupon Program and Harvest Health programs provide small financial incentives to individuals and families, research shows that even without incentives, residents of low income communities where fruits and vegetables are available for purchase consume more of these food items than residents of communities where there are no fruits and vegetables readily available (CDC, 2010). More research is necessary, however, to determine if there are additional barriers that keep low income shoppers from returning to direct markets after their benefits have been used up.

Farm to school efforts are unique in their ability to target one of the most vulnerable groups of food insecure Vermonters: school aged children. Especially programs that exist in schools where a high percentage of students qualify for free and reduced price meals, providing local food through the school is a great way to make it available to low income Vermonters. These programs also serve as an equalizer between those students who are from families with limited resources, and those who are not. The primary variables to examine when determining the effectiveness of farm to school programs at ensuring all children have access to healthy, locally produced food, is (a) the quantity of local food served per meal and (b) the frequency with which local food is included in the school menu.

Unquestionably, vegetables gathered through the Vermont Foodbank's Gleaning Program and produce from Kingsbury Farm are directed towards low income, food insecure Vermonters.

3 Does the effort enhance sustainability in the Vermont food system (by empowering farmers to keep land in agricultural use, by contributing to the economic viability of the Vermont food system, and by addressing social justice concerns?)

The Farm to Family program, Senior Farmer' Market Coupon Program and Harvest Health generate significant revenue for Vermont farmers, thereby contributing to farm viability, the economic stability of the Vermont food system, and land preservation. These programs also address the social equity component of the sustainable agriculture movement by giving benefits directly to low income, food insecure Vermonters. By inviting low income Vermonters to participate in farmers' markets and community supported agriculture (CSA), these efforts create more opportunities for interaction across socio-economic groups in Vermont.

Because of the limited financial impact of farm to school programs on Vermont farm income these programs do not contribute directly to farmland preservation. However, it can be argued that by increasing student awareness about the importance of Vermont agriculture, farm to school efforts help grow an ethic of conservation among Vermont's younger generation. Likewise, by instilling values related to eating high quality, locally produced food, farm to school programs are likely to be creating the next generation of local food consumers. In addition, children's influence on the purchasing decisions of their parents is not to be underestimated (Ballantyn, Connell & Fien, 1998). Farm to school programs that target schools and school districts with a high percentage of low income households effectively serve social justice goals encompassed in the sustainable agriculture movement. Specifically, by creating opportunities for all students to access nutritious, locally produced food, farm to school programs show that local food is not only for the well-to-do, but for people across the socio-economic spectrum. Programs that actively seek to reduce stigma

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associated with reduced price or free school meals, such as the School Breakfast Program served through the Burlington (Vermont) School Food Service, serve the social justice agenda to an even greater degree.

The Vermont Foodbank also contributes to sustainability in the Vermont food system by serving a social justice agenda. By incorporating local food into the emergency food system, the gleaning program and Kingsbury Farm create the opportunity for Vermonters in great need to access healthy, nutritious produce through foodshelves.

These programs do not, however, have a statewide impact on farmland preservation or the economic viability of the food system. Though Kingsbury Farm is a model for partnership with conservation organizations (the Vermont Land Trust), and though the farmer tenants of the farm have created a successful for profit business through their relationship with the Foodbank, one farm does not a sustainable food system make. However, because of the Foodbank's prodigious ability to address emergency food needs, it is a critical partner in furthering social justice in the local food movement. See Table 1 for a summary of programs and criteria.

Conclusion

In the short term, programs with multiple goals may make headway on both fronts, but possibly not as much progress as a program focused on only one of the two goals. However, we must address both together to avoid the long-term problem of "canceling each other out." Programs should be designed in a way that builds community connection rather than focusing exclusively on delivering a product. Creating greater understanding of the needs of farmers and low-income consumers through building relationships between them is likely to lead to the most long-lasting change.

Key recommendations related to this research are as follows:

- To increase the amount of local food that reaches low income Vermonters, we need to better understand if and how local food can be integrated into existing federal food assistance programs. This entails looking at permissive and restrictive policy examples and advocating for specific adaptations on a federal and state level.
- Sustainability education for farmers should include education about food access for the underserved. Service providers such as farm viability consultants should be trained to

incorporate food justice into their counseling toolbox.

- Nutrition education that incorporates local food literacy should be enhanced for low income Vermonters.
- Community groups should have a go-to resource for education about hunger issues and using local food to support their efforts to address food insecurity in their communities.

Based on this review, it is clear that there is a growing need for efforts that simultaneously support access to high quality, local food for underserved Vermonters while ensuring fair return to Vermont farmers. Efforts driven by this dual-goal have great potential to strengthen Vermont communities and further the social justice agenda, which is an intrinsic component of the effort to promote sustainable agriculture in the state. In order to best support these efforts at a grassroots and programmatic level, we need research that examines their impact and then identifies best practices, opportunities and barriers. Lastly, in order to address social justice in the local food movement and transcend the divisions of traditional and contemporary localism, we must understand what efforts currently support relationship building among people in different socio-economic groups, and expand upon them.

Figure 1. Summary of programs and criteria

	<u>Economic opportunity</u> Creates economic opportunity for VT farmers beyond tenure of the program	<u>Access for the underserved</u> Increases access to locally produced food for low income Vermonters	<u>Preserves agricultural land</u> Enhances sustainability criteria #1: keeps land in agricultural use	<u>Food system viability</u> Enhances sustainability criteria #2: contributes to economic viability of the food system	<u>Social equity</u> Enhances sustainability criteria #3: addresses social justice
Farm to Family, Senior Farmer's Market Coupon Program (includes Senior Farm Share) and Harvest Health	? More research needed.	✓	✓	✓ Need to explore opportunities to capture a greater percentage of SNAP benefits.	✓ Creates opportunities for more <i>bridge capital</i> in Vermont.
Farm to School efforts (state and federal)	✓	✓	? Helps to support an ethic of conservation among Vermont's younger generation.	✓	✓
Vermont Foodbank: Gleaning, Kingsbury Farm	? Specifically for Kingsbury Farm	✓	? Specifically for Kingsbury Farm	✗	✓

Key: ✓ = Meets criteria ? = Uncertain or lacks broad impact ✗ = Does not meet criteria

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