

Ramping Up Food Systems Jobs in Low-Income Communities

Concept Paper

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As concerns about food quality, safety, and access command increased attention and industrial agriculture's contribution to ecological degradation and global warming is better understood, local and regional food systems have reemerged as strategies to promote family and community wellbeing and economic opportunity.¹ Cities and states are including food systems in sustainability plans, providing incentives to expand farmers' markets and develop food enterprises, and making more land available for farming and greening projects. Planners and developers are advocating urban agriculture as a reuse option for vacant property, while community-based entrepreneurs are testing innovative strategies to produce food for residents of underserved communities (also known as *food deserts*). Family farmers are experiencing increased regional demand for their products from restaurateurs and consumers who are willing to pay a premium for upscale specialty goods, as well as from families who want nutritious, fresh foods at an affordable price. Conventional grocery stores are responding to the demand for locally- and sustainably-grown products, and schools and hospitals are increasingly changing their procurement policies to support local agriculture.

Food and agriculture systems have also attracted the attention of sustainable development, environmentalists, and green economy advocates. Many of these strategies offer triple bottom line outcomes. These initiatives are demonstrating that they can contribute to a more ecologically sustainable, economically integrated, demand-driven food and agriculture sector – a sector which, at a macro level, is one of the largest contributors to the loss of biodiversity and greenhouse gas emissions, as well as to our nation's obesity epidemic.

Less clearly formulated, however, is the role local and regional food systems can play in economic development and jobs strategies, particularly those that encourage import substitution, cluster development, and target the entire food system – production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste recycling. This paper argues that there are underdeveloped linkages within and across both emerging food systems strategies and the conventional food and agriculture sectors that could help boost the competitiveness of local and regional economies and benefit workers who face barriers to good jobs and advancement opportunities. It proposes building on sector-based workforce development strategies to identify existing and emerging clusters of job opportunities for low-income workers within local and regional food and agriculture systems, and using food systems activities as entry points to career advancement and post-secondary education in related sectors.

¹ Food systems encompass the range of social, economic, cultural, environmental, energy, and political dimensions associated with food – from food production to harvesting, processing, storage, distribution, marketing, consumption, and waste recovery. For the purposes of this paper, food systems emphasize local production, biodiversity, technologies and inputs that are environmentally appropriate and cost-effective, and community-driven values associated with food security, resilience, sustainability, fair employment, health and nutrition. Food systems strategies also involve strengthening the linkages between buyers and sellers at various points along a food value chain – such as between users of food inputs and end products – thereby minimizing risk, stabilizing markets, and promoting growth and job creation.

Convergence and Opportunity. The concept of local and regional food systems is still evolving as a development paradigm. The stakeholders who have dominated this area have mainly focused on community-based initiatives that address problems of food access for residents of disinvested communities on the one hand, and increasing the scale of food production and market capture by small- and mid-sized farmers on the other. At the same time, conventional food and agriculture, which is based on a large-scale industrialized model, is largely insular and often disconnected from economic development networks. While there are exceptions on all sides, the food and agriculture sectors generally have been overlooked by economic development and workforce development. This is changing as new stakeholders embrace food system, but has not achieved notable scale.

Private foundations are increasing grantmaking and mission-related investments in local food and agricultural enterprises, while urban designers and planners are making urban and peri-urban agriculture and local food security cornerstones of right-sizing strategies. Other visionaries are promoting productive landscapes that incorporate residential and community gardens, commercial agriculture (food and ornamental horticulture products), and biofuel production. Local officials have identified urban agriculture and food processing as viable investments for the recovery and reuse of vacant and underutilized residential, commercial, and industrial properties – properties that typically have access to water, utilities, and warehousing and distribution networks.

Governments are offering creative tax credits and other incentives for food enterprise development. A number of states have embraced Pennsylvania's groundbreaking initiative to create investment pools to underwrite the development of full-service grocery stores in poor communities and reduce the barriers to affordable, quality food. This work has led to the National Fresh Food Financing Initiative – one of an array of efforts that dovetail with Michelle Obama's *Let's Move* initiative and expanded programs under the U.S. Department of Agriculture's *Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food* initiative, which are designed to strengthen the linkages between farmers and consumers and expand food enterprise development, organic agriculture, and health and nutrition programs.

Food systems advocates are working to capitalize on these developments and demonstrate the economic impact of local and regional food production and market activity. Key assumptions embedded in food systems thinking are that these projects can: (a) contribute to local and regional economies by keeping capital in communities, where it can be invested in local initiatives; and (b) stimulate the expansion of ancillary enterprises needed to support the food and agriculture sectors. Central to this paper is the assumption that food systems can expand job opportunities for residents of low-income communities by organizing food production, processing, and distribution around existing infrastructure and underutilized property.

Connecting Workforce Development and Food Systems. Small- and medium-sized food and agricultural enterprises are generally disconnected from workforce development networks, particularly those that promote career advancement and post-secondary education opportunities for at-risk youth and low-wage workers. These firms typically rely on informal hiring networks and internal training systems and experience marginal retention rates. Understandably, few urban-based or regional sector job initiatives have targeted food and agriculture.² Many workforce development advocates have steered clear of food and agriculture related occupations because of the poor quality, low wages, and limited upgrade

² For example, the National Fund for Workforce Solutions' 2010 database of workforce development partnerships listed only five projects involving agriculture and two related to forestry products, all of which are in Pennsylvania. None targets energy, food processing, green jobs, or natural resources.

opportunities associated with food processing jobs, and safety and ethical issues affecting migrant and seasonal farmworkers. However, implicit in food systems strategies is a commitment to fair trade, fair wages, safe workplaces, transparency, and other values that promote food justice and food sovereignty. While not all food systems jobs would classify as family-supporting jobs, they offer multiple points of entry to a wider set of employment and career opportunities than normally considered.

A broad definition of food systems includes a range of jobs besides the cultivation of fruits, vegetables and staple crops, including those related to the production, processing, and distribution of fiber, fisheries, forestry, livestock, nursery and horticulture products. It also includes occupations related to natural resources management and environmental services, as well as food services and culinary arts. Well-established career paths exist within many food, agriculture, and natural resources sub-disciplines, and many occupations require less than a bachelor's degree for entry. At the same time, however, conventional sector strategies may not necessarily capture the full range of opportunities associated with these interrelated sectors. For example, under current modalities career advancement strategies for workers trained in hospital food preparation would typically focus on occupations within the health sector and probably not include jobs in culinary arts. These limitations suggest the need to better understand job opportunities that cut across different employment sectors.

Additional untapped opportunities exist at the nexus of food systems, renewable energy, and green economies. Biofuel and biogas production has received little attention in the context of urban and regional renewable energy strategies. Nor has the role of urban agricultural and urban forestry in climate adaptation, carbon sequestration, and resource recovery been widely developed. Similarly, food, agriculture, and natural resources have not factored heavily in green collar jobs, despite their eligibility in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Nonetheless, there are a number of urban agriculture projects that, as part of green jobs programs, have been used to provide skills training to jobseekers facing employment barriers, including ex-offenders and at-risk youth. These projects complement community-based gardening and food enterprise projects that engage recent immigrants, youth, and others, all of which can create a pipeline to better job opportunities if the linkages to workforce development networks are strengthened.

In addition to community-based training providers, community colleges and other locally focused higher education institutions, such as minority-serving institutions,³ are well poised to help advance these linkages. Historically, post-secondary education and training in food and agriculture-related disciplines has been the domain of the land grant universities. They focus on four-year and advanced degree training, tend to offer limited non-degree short-term training, and have weak linkages to other training providers. Generally, land grant universities and the outreach and extension systems they rely on to connect to communities have been slow to embrace local and regional food systems, concentrating instead on conventional commodity production and biotechnology applications. Although there are exceptions, these programs tend to be small and under-resourced. As an alternative, community colleges – institutions recognized for their strong commitment to both local workforce training and economic development – are increasingly addressing needs that are emerging in areas such as local and regional food systems, green technologies, and sustainable development through certificate, two-year

³ Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) include Alaska Native-Serving Institutions, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Indian Tribally-Controlled Colleges and Universities, and Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions. Because of historic patterns of under-funding, coupled with their local focus and strong commitment to economically disenfranchised communities, many of these schools have developed specialties in programs, systems, and technologies that are quite applicable to sustainable development and local food systems strategies.

degree, and customized training programs in food, agriculture, and natural resource-based enterprises. As longstanding participants in economic development and workforce development partnerships, community colleges and universities can play an important role in advancing a food systems agenda.

Proposed Strategy. This concept paper proposes a multi-track approach to ramping up local and regional food systems activity in order to leverage jobs for residents of low-income communities. The strategy would involve organizing multiple stakeholders under local and regional, sector-focused, workforce development partnerships. Key elements of this strategy involve:

- Linking food systems to: (a) innovative local and regional economic development initiatives, such as vacant land reuse, right-sizing, enterprise development, import substitution, and cluster development strategies; and (b) the workforce development networks capable of leveraging family-supporting jobs and advancement opportunities from these approaches.
- Targeting food security, community gardening, urban agriculture, and other community-based endeavors as vehicles to: (a) deliver basic skills, occupational skills, and work readiness training to at-risk youth and low-wage workers; and (b) provide a pipeline to jobs and post-secondary education throughout the broader food, agriculture, and natural resources sectors.
- Assessing entry-level job requirements and career pathways within the food, agriculture, and natural resources sectors generally and sustainable local/regional and green economies in particular, as well as identifying cross-sector pathways.
- Developing alternative credentials for food systems and related natural resource-based and green economy jobs that typically require a bachelor's degree, and determining the capacity of post-secondary training institutions (public, private and nonprofit) to provide both training to jobseekers and support services to local entrepreneurs.
- Building the capacity of food systems organizations, workforce development providers, economic developers, and other stakeholders to advance a dual-customer jobs agenda in these areas.

The overall outcomes will be expanded job and enterprise development opportunities and a higher level of integration between workforce development and those industry sectors that are at the vanguard of 21st challenges of resource utilization, climate change, and sustainable development.