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Working Toward the Common Table: The Policy and Program Implications of Vermont’s Unified Approach to Social Justice, Food Insecurity, and Local Food

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Hunger and food insecurity are growing concerns in the United States and around the world. Recently, the US Department of Agriculture released a report indicating that 13.6% of Vermonters are food insecure (up from 9.6% in 2004–2006) and 6.2% are hungry (termed very low food security). At the same time, there is significant financial risk associated with food production 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.

KEYWORDS local agriculture, hunger, food insecurity, sustainability, economic development, Vermont, policy

INTRODUCTION

Hunger and food insecurity is an area of growing concern in the United States and around the world. Consequently, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has designated global food security as one of the 5 focal areas for the

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National Institute of 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 (termed very low food security). This compares to the national averages of 13.5% food insecure and 5.2% hungry. 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. As a reference point, families of 4 living at 100% of the federal poverty line earn $21,200. This indicates the financial risk associated with agriculture and the challenges Vermont farmers face in achieving business viability and also explains the need for so many farm families to have a source of off-farm income, despite the long hours they invest on the farm. Though 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. Though 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. Though 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. 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 his or her food choices.

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 (CSA) 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, civic agriculture, community food systems, and food citizenship. In a more recent framing, McEntee called 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. 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 local food consumers. 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 socioeconomic groups. To illustrate this social exclusion, McEntee wrote, “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.”

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 argued 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 well-being 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.

By including both sets of localist concerns in outreach efforts, it is hoped that there will be more opportunities for community interaction (especially among groups that may coexist but not have strong relationships). Additionally, more opportunities for reflexive decision making by consumers can potentially lead 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.\textsuperscript{7,12}

**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 the following:

1. Federal food access programs and related incentive programs: Farm to Family, Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program and Harvest Health
2. State, nonprofit, and community collaborations: Farm to School efforts
3. Nonprofit hunger relief organizations: The Vermont Foodbank Gleaning Network and Kingsbury Farm

Though 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 the 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). Though varied, these programs have common themes and characteristics that make them useful for this analysis.

**DISCUSSION**

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 Coupon Program are designed to increase low-income Vermonters’ attendance at Vermont farmers’ markets, but they require more research about the long-term purchasing behaviors of benefit recipients. Studies show that incentive programs, such as the Harvest Health Coupon Program, have long-lasting effects when (1) the primary barrier to accessing local food through farmers’ markets is consumers’ limited food budget and (2) they are coupled with educational information that is relevant to the concerns of their target audience. 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 foodservices, then there is potential for long-term economic benefit to farms. If local food purchasing is not a priority of the school or school foodservice, 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.

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

Though the Farm to Family, Senior Farmers’ Market Coupon Program, and Harvest Health Coupon Program 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. More research is necessary, however, to determine whether 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 (1) the quantity of local food served per meal and (2) the frequency with which local food is included in the school menu.

Unquestionably, vegetables gathered though the Vermont Foodbank’s Gleaning Program and produce from Kingsbury Farm are directed toward low-income, food insecure Vermonters.

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 Coupon Program 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 CSA,
these efforts create more opportunities for interaction across socioeconomic 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.15 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 socioeconomic spectrum. Programs that actively seek to reduce stigma 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 food shelves. 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 2 goals. However, we must address both together to avoid the long-term problem of programs and policies 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
**TABLE 1** Summary of Programs and Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Economic opportunity: Creates economic opportunity for VT farmers beyond tenure of the program</th>
<th>Access for the underserved: Increases access to locally produced food for low-income Vermonters</th>
<th>Preservation of agricultural land: Enhances sustainability criteria #1: keeps land in agricultural use</th>
<th>Food system viability: Enhances sustainability criteria #2: contributes to economic viability of the food system</th>
<th>Social equity: Enhances sustainability criteria #3: addresses social justice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farm to Family, Senior Farmers' Market Coupon Program (includes senior farm share) and Harvest Health</td>
<td>? (More research needed)</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√ (Need to explore opportunities to capture a greater percentage of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm to School efforts (state and federal)</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermont Foodbank: Gleaning, Kingsbury Farm</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>√</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Key: √ = meets the criteria; ? = uncertain or lacks broad impact; x = does not meet the criteria.
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.16

Key recommendations related to this research are as follows:

- To increase the amount of local food that reaches low-income citizens, we need to better understand whether 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 Vermon ters.
- 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 socioeconomic groups and expand upon them.

REFERENCES