

ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORK INFRASTRUCTURE: FOOD HUB DEVELOPMENT IN VERMONT

Abstract

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The idea of a “food hub” is a current buzzword in the realm of alternative food networks. In Vermont, and elsewhere, the term is used in a variety of different ways - as a description of a region with a buzz of agricultural activity, as a community group that is passionate about local food consumption, or as a specific facility that aggregates and distributes local food. What exactly is meant by the term “food hub” is unclear.

Although food hub definitions are continuing to evolve, the common theme that is emerging is the presence of aggregation and distribution. This thesis explores organizations in the non-profit sector in Vermont that are actively aggregating or distributing food, or are clearly moving in that direction at the time of the study. Qualitative research methods were used through semi-structured interviews with key informants. Interview questions focused on the following themes: function, goals and scope; definition of a food hub; governance and structure; capital; embeddedness and network; and services and functionality. These themes were developed through a review of alternative food network literature, which identified gaps in knowledge within the emerging food hub concept, which include: definition, embeddedness, organizational development, and services.

The themes and models that have emerged from these semi-structured interviews have been used to develop a typology of food hubs within the non-profit sector that characterizes the different attributes, services, and goals. This typology will be a useful tool for emerging food hubs, potential funders, and government institutions. The food hub themes and meanings that key informants have described will be contrasted to developing definitions and meanings that have been explored in the literature, in order to identify areas for further study. This thesis clarifies the meaning of a food hub and develops an initial typology of how different food hub models originate and operate.