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Theme Overview: The Linkages between Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Regional Food Networks

Kathleen Liang

JEL Classifications: Q10, Q13, Q18, Q56, R11, O13

Keywords: Food system, Regional food networks, Resilience, Entrepreneurship, Public Policy

Entrepreneurship has been the key driving force in developing and designing innovative food strategies at local and regional levels. Food strategies include methods and procedures of production, aggregation, distribution, transportation, marketing, and resource management. The three pillars of creating and establishing a successful venture involve entrepreneurial mindsets/attributes, entrepreneurial knowledge/skills, and entrepreneurial opportunities. The links between entrepreneurship and food strategies become more obvious in the recent “local food” movement as local farmers and producers develop and adopt innovative methods to connect with consumers. The local-to-regional food strategies emerging across the country have stimulated discussions around the social, economic, and ecological impacts of food production and consumption.

Proponents of both global and regional/local scales argue about their relative benefits for market development and food security. The fact is that we need to feed a growing population with healthy food. More importantly, the priority of agriculture has evolved beyond the focus of production. Some suggest that local/regional production and marketing can enhance food security and quality of life (Allen, 1999; Campbell, 2004; Martinez, 2010). Others argue that our dependence on the commodity food system may, in fact, undermine food security and the ability of regions to provide for themselves (Pothukuchi and Kauffman, 2000; Chappell, 2011).

In a new era of designing and developing creative solutions, the concept of regional food networks (RFNs) offers a broader interdisciplinary theme relative to food systems. A food system involves resources, decisions, actions, and outcomes from production to management and marketing. A food network, in contrast, emphasizes the various levels, types, and attributes of relationships between actors within and across food systems interacting with one another. It is essential to understand and capitalize on relationship quality in the process of discussing policies to improve, support, and enhance the services and functions of sustainable RFNs.

This collection of articles discusses findings from a project funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture under National Institute for Food and Agriculture grant 2014-68006. Our primary focus is to explore, identify, and

Articles in this theme:

- **Can Regional Food Networks and Entrepreneurial Strategies Enhance Food System Resilience?**
Sally Duncan, Christy Anderson Brekken, Sue Lurie, Rob Fiegenger, Seth Sherry, and Chyi-lyi (Kathleen) Liang
- **Linking Regional Food Networks to Ecological Resilience**
Christy Anderson Brekken, Rob Fiegenger, and Sally Duncan
- **The Support Ecosystem for Regional Food Network Entrepreneurship**
Thomas S. Lyons and Michael Lee
- **Farm Incubators - Creating Entrepreneurial Relationships to Support Prosperous Food Networks**
Kathleen Liang

examine how entrepreneurship influences the process of designing and implementing innovative strategies to support farming and communities. The article by Duncan et al. discusses the potential impacts of the “local food” movement on the economic, social, and environmental benefits gained through integrated RFNs. There are nested scales within the RFNs with respect to social, economic, and ecological connections to foster entrepreneurial opportunities between producers and consumers. The authors hypothesize that policies targeted to support various scales of production and consumption should significantly strengthen both RFNs and long-term food security.

Brekken, Fiegenger, and Duncan provide a framework to further illustrate producer motivations for environmentally sensitive production and how their decisions could improve ecological resilience. Environmental consequences have not been at the forefront of the local food movement. Many existing food policies encourage improvement of farming practices with respect to conservation and resource allocation, but it is not clear how various production and management strategies directly or indirectly relate to sustaining a healthy ecosystem. Through empirical surveys in Oregon, the authors find that farmers who choose ecological farm management practices may be poised to support RFNs. Marketing through RFNs may have strong influences on farm practices, leading to improved regional environmental outcomes by taking advantage of the spatial, temporal, and figurative proximity of food supply chain actors as messages about the environmental impact of food move among producers, consumers, policy makers, and the environment.

A positive and supporting entrepreneurship landscape is one key element to promote and advance successful business ventures. Lyons and Lee examine selected organizations that underpin the support system for entrepreneurship within RFNs. This review of the entrepreneurship landscape offers examples of representative organizations that support agricultural- or food-related entrepreneurial initiatives at various policy levels. The support or services provided to food networks by various organizations might not be explicitly recognizable in communities. Lyons and Lee discuss the types of activities that these supporting organizations undertake, including purposes, objectives, limitations, and policy orientation corresponding to different endeavors.

Finally, Liang shares insights about the importance of creating and sustaining entrepreneurial relationships in RFNs. The ultimate goal of a sustainable RFN is to motivate, support, and enhance collaboration with all participants. Examples of farm incubator programs, in which program participants receive support and guidance to develop and sustain entrepreneurial relationships and co-independent decisions, are offered. Participants in such programs are more likely to be mindful about environmental impacts and conservation practices through training and education programs and to engage in direct marketing through farmers’ markets, community-supported agriculture programs, on-farm markets, and co-operatives.

For More Information

Allen, P. 1999. “Reweaving the Food Security Safety Net: Mediating Entitlement and Entrepreneurship.” *Agriculture and Human Values* 16(2):117–129.

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Pothukuchi, K., and Kauffman, J. 2000. “The Food System – A Stranger to the Planning Field.” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 66(2):113–124.

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