



THE MICHIGAN **FOOD HUB NETWORK**

A Case Study in Building
Effective Networks for
Food System Change



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For any new business sector to thrive, there needs to be fertile ground to nurture new businesses using a coordinated approach to resource investment, technical and financial assistance, applied research, and outreach. To facilitate this fertile ground, there needs to be a learning community for the businesses and the service providers who work with them. The Michigan Food Hub Learning and Innovation Network (hereafter, the Network) was organized and launched in 2012 in response to a set of identified challenges and opportunities to increase market opportunities for farmers, increase local food commerce with larger-volume food buyers, and build capacity for hubs to supply healthy food to historically marginalized Michigan communities.



The overall goal of the Network is to build the capacity of Michigan food hubs to successfully work with their public and private partners to meet their business goals, which in many cases includes more effective and efficient ways to supply healthy food to low-income communities in the state. A unique work partnership between the MSU Center for Regional Food Systems (who convenes the Network along with Morse Marketing Connections, LLC) and the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has made it possible for Michigan food hubs to have state funding support and a learning community in which to build cooperation across food hubs and address technical and other hurdles that limit food hub success.

The Network convenes three day-long statewide meetings of food hubs and various support partners annually; the location of these meetings rotate across the state. Network participants have access to quarterly food hub webinars, a statewide listserv and (in some parts of the state) part-time local food hub facilitators as part of Network services. The Michigan Food Hub Network works closely with the National Food Hub Collaboration led by the Wallace Center at Winrock International to coordinate state and national food hub activities, such as the webinars and other educational and research opportunities, so the two efforts are synergistic rather than redundant.





Based on a survey conducted in March 2014 of Network participants (subscribers to the listserv and anyone who had ever attended a Network convening), 87% of respondents agree or strongly agree that the Network is catalyzing the development of food hubs. Aggregated responses from Network convening surveys for the period 2012–2014 indicate that 92% of participants believed that Network convenings increased their knowledge of food hubs. During 2012–2014, more than 85% of respondents have seen an increase in collaboration across food hubs as a result of the statewide meetings. Participants from the August 2014 statewide meeting averaged 3.3 new potential partnerships initiated through that convening alone. In part due to this dynamic learning community, Michigan food hubs are looking at collaborative models of using information technology services, sharing information and best practices on farmer food safety pilot projects, and considering other business to business collaborative efforts.

Since its start in summer 2012, the Michigan Food Hub Network has learned—through trial and error—many lessons about appropriate network structure and strategic management to build the capacity of Michigan food hubs. Here are some key lessons other food hubs and their partners should consider when starting a food hub network.

- 1. Food hub networks need appropriate financial, social, and intellectual resources to help manage the collaboration infrastructure to foster multiorganizational support.**
- 2. A food hub network can be most beneficial when food hubs have ready access to coordinated and synchronized technical and financial assistance.**
- 3. Networks must be ready to customize communication and technical assistance to the needs of each food hub.**
- 4. Network facilitators should use a servant leadership approach to support the network.**
- 5. Local consultants and educators that serve food hub networks need to have adequate technical, business, and facilitation skills.**
- 6. An environment of collaboration and the creation of spaces for collective problem solving are crucial to creating a robust food hub learning community.**
- 7. Constant evaluation and revision of strategies is necessary to adapt to unanticipated needs and challenges that arise.**
- 8. Network practitioners should view their network's progress and evolution through the lens of an ecocycle rather than a lifecycle.**

INTRODUCTION

The local food movement in the United States has evolved over the past 25 years. There has been significant growth in the number of farmers markets, community-supported agriculture enterprises, farm to school programs, and restaurants that source local ingredients for their menus. The number of farmers markets in the U.S. has increased from 1,775 in 1994 to 8,144 in 2013, an increase of more than 460% (United States Department of Agriculture-Agricultural Marketing Service, 2013). The National Restaurant Association's "What's Hot" survey ranked locally sourced meat and seafood and locally grown produce as the top two predicted menu trends of 2014 (National Restaurant Association, 2013). In recent years, advocates of local food have found allies who support improved food access and health, food justice, and an end to structural racism in the food system. Many people who are active in these movements have come to understand the important link to local food through its connection and use of the term "good food," coined less than a decade ago by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) and its strategic partners. The term "good food" has been used to describe food that has four key elements:

Healthy

Providing nourishment and enabling all people to thrive

Green

Produced in a manner that is environmentally sustainable

Fair

No one along the food chain is exploited in its creation

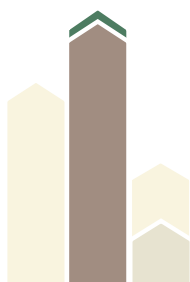
Affordable

All people have access to it



Michigan, home to the WKKF, has been a leader in supporting collaboration across organizations and businesses at the state level to increase the availability of good food. Michigan was first in the United States to create a statewide charter for good food, which envisions "a thriving economy, equity, and sustainability for all of Michigan and its people through a food system rooted in local communities and centered on good food" (Colasanti et al., 2010). Michigan State University's Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS), with funding from the WKKF and others, plays an important coordinating role in convening organizations, farmers, food buyers, and food advocates to advance the six goals of the Michigan Good Food Charter.

As the demand for local food has increased dramatically among individual consumers as well as larger-volume buyers in recent years, local food businesses, with the assistance of private and public partners, have explored new models to supply larger volumes of local food beyond individual farm direct marketing while trying to maintain the values inherent in local food transactions. Food hubs have emerged in the past five years as a type of source-identified food business with the most basic function of acting as an aggregator and distributor of local foods. A commonly used definition of a food hub was developed by the National Food Hub Collaboration, coordinated by the Wallace Center at Winrock International (Barham et al., 2012): "A regional food hub is a business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution,



and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand.”

In early 2013, the CRFS, in cooperation with the Wallace Center at Winrock International, surveyed more than 100 food hubs across the United States to understand their businesses, impacts, and challenges (Fischer, Hamm, Pirog, Fisk, Farbman, & Kiraly, 2013). Results indicate that 62% of food hubs are less than five years old, 31% have at least \$1,000,000 in annual revenue, and the majority of food hubs (including those operated by nonprofits) are in metropolitan areas and support their businesses with little or no grant assistance. Nearly half of food hubs surveyed who do retail sales accepted Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, with nearly half of those hubs offering matching programs for SNAP (Fischer et al., 2013).

The most financially successful food hubs tend to be for-profit and cooperative in structure, in operation for more than 10 years, and working with a relatively large number of producers (Fischer et al., 2013). Newer hubs were more likely to be reaching out to supply good food to low-income communities. Many food hubs indicated needs for assistance in managing growth, identifying appropriate staffing levels, and access to capital to increase trucking and warehousing capacity (Fischer et al., 2013). Results of a comprehensive benchmarking study of nearly 50 U.S. food hubs was conducted in 2013-2014 by the Wallace Center, Farm Credit Council, Farm Credit East, and Morse Marketing Connections, LLC. As more studies are conducted to analyze the profitability and economic and social impact of food hub businesses and their associated services, it is likely that a more robust definition of food hubs may emerge.



Goal of this Publication

The goal of this publication is to provide an overview of the creation, implementation, short-term outcomes, and lessons learned in building the capacity of food hubs and their partners through the Michigan Food Hub Network. The audience for this publication includes food hub managers and the various public and private partners who provide financial, technical, and other services to food hubs. It also includes those who seek to use high-functioning networks to bring about food systems change.

What Are Networks, and Why Use Them in Food Systems Change?

Vandeventer & Mandell (2007) describe a network as “many different organizations working in concert as equal partners pursuing a common social or civic purpose over a sustained period of time.” In their work studying wealth creation through rural networks, Castelloe, Watson, & Allen (2011) define networks as “webs of organizations and individuals that are collaborating strategically to move forward a coordinated body of work.” Networks are thought to be a key component of markets because they channel and direct flows of information and resources from position to position across the relationships in the supply chain (Owen-Smith & Powell, 2004). Geographic proximity and organizational form are thought to have the greatest influence on altering the flow of information across a network (Owen-Smith & Powell, 2004).

Networks are critical for our survival; without them, we would have great difficulty finding and buying food, receiving packages or e-mail, traveling across the country to see friends and relatives, or buying goods and services we need for our homes and businesses. Although human beings have organized along networks since the dawn of civilization, we have been able to reconfigure and grow networks at a greater range and speed in recent years due to the advances we’ve made in communication technology through the proliferation of cell phone culture and the Internet (Castells, 2009, 2012). Castells (2009, 2012) identifies some key frames through which networks shape our lives:

Globalization

We can now easily have close business and personal relationships with people across the globe.

Reorganization

Communication technologies in networks are challenging how we define business and organizational structures.

Role of the Media

Everything now happens in front of the media (TV, press, Internet).

Shift of Power

Power is shifting from traditionally structured institutions to socially designed networks.

Sharing information and knowledge freely and having a strong willingness to help others through a network has been a hallmark of the people who are building local food systems. In the Network Weaver Handbook, Holley (2012) discusses the term *complex reciprocity*, which is the sharing of information and resources with others without expecting a return from each person you help because you know that others in the network will share with you. More and more people involved in local food systems networks see the value of functioning as connectors and boundary-spanners, making sure people and organizations with specific expertise know about each other and the work they do across various stakeholders in the food system.

Whether the food system’s goal is about moving food, shaping policy, or providing technical and financial assistance, there’s value in being able to connect the right people with each other at the right time. The local food movement’s funders and practitioners have learned the power of convening and creating the space for sharing inspiring stories of success and hope and, conversely, how to learn and benefit from failure. The Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders Network¹ is a national example of that commitment.

Although working via networks is essential to achieve effective food systems change, networks can differ in their communications and operations structure, level of risk, level of trust, and time commitment. Vandeventer & Mandell (2007) characterize three network typologies:

Cooperating networks model and explain best practices, convene problem-solving sessions, and update each other on new projects. Cooperating networks involve low risk but lead to little, if any, systemic social or political reform.

Coordinating networks push organizational boundaries and engage in more interdependent activities. These networks involve low to moderate risk and have a somewhat better chance than cooperating networks for achieving systemic change or reform.

Collaborating networks have methods in place to resolve conflicts, redefine their roles within and outside their organizations, and begin to reallocate resources across the network rather than within organizations. These high-trust networks have the highest level of risk but the greatest chance for system change or reform.

¹ <http://www.safsf.org/>

Trust and Network Building

In his pioneering work on trust theory, Jack Gibb (1991) compared high-trust versus low-trust scenarios in organizations (see Figure 1). High-trust organizations and networks are more stable and there is less need for control; low-trust organizations and networks are fragile and unstable and need to be propped up by myriad rules and regulations. Research on trust within and across organizational networks suggests that if you want to build a high-functioning network to influence systemic change, create the conditions for a high-trust environment.

Iowa’s Value Chain Partnerships (VCP), which operated between 2002 and 2011, was a network of food and agriculture working groups that aspired to move toward Vandeventer and Mandell’s typology of a collaborating network, using an approach of building high-trust relationships across key partners working to build a more resilient local food system. Stevenson & Pirog (2008) described value chains as “values-based strategic business partnerships featuring mid-scale agri-food enterprises that create and distribute responsibilities and rewards equitably across the supply chain, and [which] operate

effectively at regional levels with significant volumes of high-quality, differentiated food products.” In this definitional context, the term “value chain” refers to a shift in power by emphasizing a more equitable distribution of risk, responsibility, and reward across all food system partners.

During its height of operation, VCP coordinated six food and agriculture networks, or work groups, whose leaders met on a monthly basis to share learnings and further integrate Iowa’s sustainable food and agricultural work across the lenses of community food business development, food production and meat processing, health, and energy. One of these work groups, the Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG), was created in 2003 and developed as a “network of networks.” RFSWG convened and created a learning community space for as many as 16 local food networks. Intentionally moving toward collaborating food systems networks for VCP (which closed in 2011) and the RFSWG (which is still in operation in 2014) has resulted in state food policy change in Iowa (Pirog & Bregendahl, 2012) and a statewide effort to collect local food economic data (Bregendahl & Enderton, 2013).

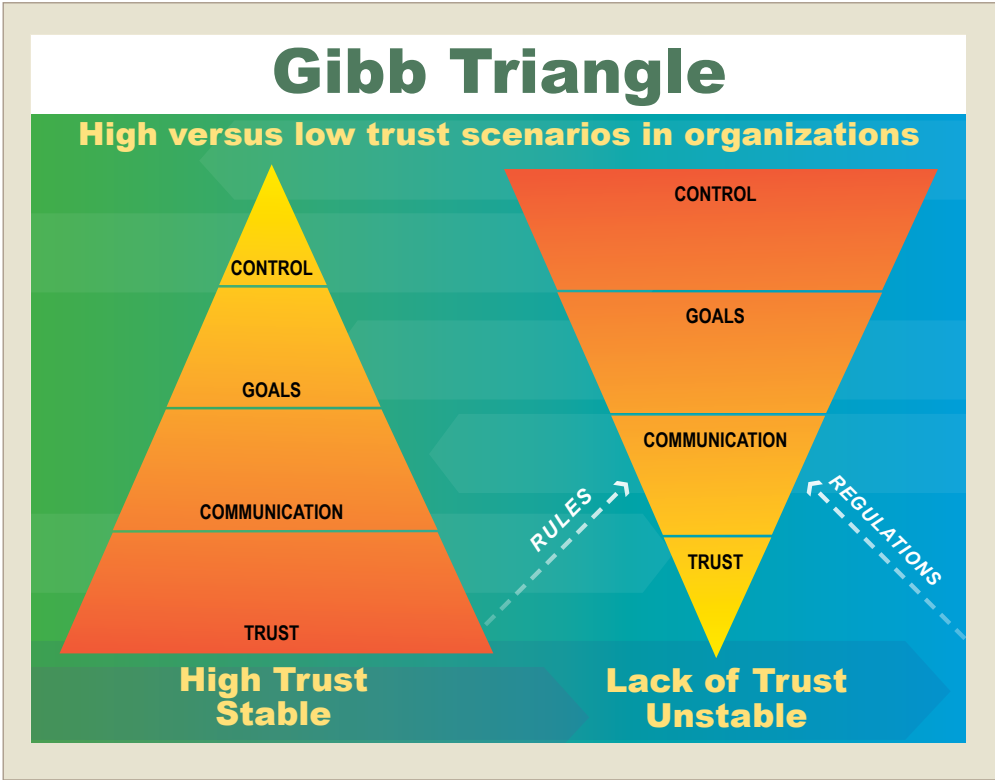


Figure 1

Why Develop a Statewide Food Hub Network?

For any new business sector to thrive, there needs to be fertile ground to nurture new businesses using a coordinated approach to resource investment, technical and financial assistance, applied research, and outreach. To facilitate this fertile ground, there needs to be a learning community for the businesses and the service providers who work with them. Across the United States, the National Food Hub Collaboration² coordinated by the Wallace Center at Winrock International plays a critical role in fostering such a learning community, which

coordinates technical assistance as well as applied research and outreach. There were also many important network lessons learned in Iowa through VCP and RFSWG and other food systems partnership-based projects through more localized Michigan efforts in Detroit, Flint, Grand Rapids, Lansing, Ann Arbor, Battle Creek, Traverse City, and the Upper Peninsula. Based on these learnings and models, we believed that the Michigan Food Hub Network could become a statewide high-capacity learning community for food hubs.

Creation of the Michigan Food Hub Network

The Michigan Food Hub Learning and Innovation Network (hereafter, the Network) was developed in response to a set of identified challenges and opportunities to increase market opportunities for farmers, increase local food commerce with larger-volume food buyers, and build capacity for hubs to supply healthy food to historically marginalized Michigan communities. In a set of meetings convened from 2011 through spring 2012 by the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD) and the CRFS with assistance from Morse Marketing Connections (MMC), food hubs emerged as an important business model to respond to these key challenges. Food hub businesses, local food system educators, local government officials, food consultants, nonprofit representatives, and farmers attending these meetings participated in a process to identify the economic and food security opportunities that food hubs could provide and prioritized a set of challenges that needed to be addressed for food hubs to succeed.

The meetings informed both the development by MDARD of a Value-Added/Regional Food Systems competitive grant program (created with new state funding) and a proposal by the CRFS submitted to the Kresge Foundation to create the Network in the spring of 2012. The Kresge Foundation had recently provided grant support to the National



Food Hub Collaboration coordinated by the Wallace Center. In the summer of 2012, MDARD announced its Value-Added/Regional Food Systems Request for Proposals (RFP), and the Kresge Foundation funded the Michigan Food Hub Network. The unique work relationship between MDARD and the CRFS (in partnership with MMC) continued beyond this RFP and Network launch through the statewide meetings of the Network and the review process for the RFP in 2012. This work relationship through the Network remains an important factor in the continued growth and success of food hub-related businesses in the state today.

MDARD provided more than \$950,000 in grants (nearly half of the total grant dollars) to support five food hub projects in Detroit, the Upper Peninsula, Ann Arbor, Traverse City, and Lansing in 2012. All of the funded projects had already been engaged in the initial food hub meetings prior to the start of the Network, and these hubs and these funded food hub projects provided a foundation and programmatic base for the Network to operate and function.

² The National Food Hub Collaboration is a partnership between the Wallace Center at Winrock International, the National Good Food Network, USDA, the MSU Center for Regional Food Systems, Wholesome Wave, the National Farm to School Network, the Farm Credit Council, and School Food Focus. The Collaboration is working to ensure the success of existing and emerging food hubs in the U.S. by building capacity through connection, outreach, research, technical assistance, and partnerships. The National Food Hub Collaboration is an outgrowth of the Wallace Center's National Good Food Network.

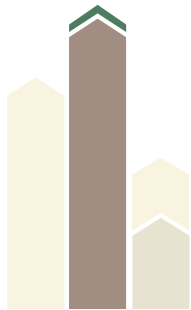
Implementation: Network Organizational Structure and Function



The overall goal of the Network is to build the capacity of Michigan food hubs to successfully work with their public and private partners to meet their business goals, which in many cases includes more effective and efficient ways to supply healthy food to low-income communities in the state. The Network is co-convened by the CRFS and MMC. Quarterly food hub webinars and a statewide listserv were also initiated during the summer of 2012 to provide education and communications support to the Network. The Michigan Food Hub Network began to work closely with the Wallace Center to coordinate state and national food hub activities, such as the webinars and other educational and research opportunities, so the two efforts would be synergistic rather than redundant.

Eight local food hub facilitators were hired in the fall of 2012, through small contracts with the CRFS, to support key regions that either had existing food hubs funded by MDARD or a strong local interest in developing a hub. Considerations were also made to cover key urban population centers and rural regions with lower-income communities that did not have ready access to good food.

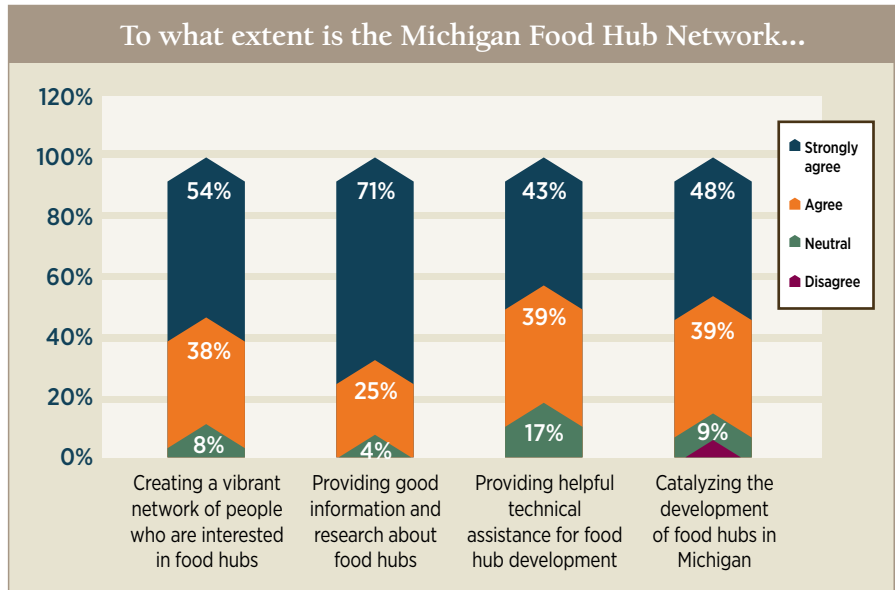
Key initial roles of the facilitators included 1) building awareness of the Network, regional food systems, and food hubs, 2) connecting their regions to basic and advanced technical resources for food hubs and sharing news on new funding opportunities for food hubs, and 3) reporting back to the Network on food hub emergence and activity in their regions. Local food hub facilitators were initially hired in Detroit, Ann Arbor, Lansing, Battle Creek, Shelby County (West Michigan), south-central Michigan, northeast Michigan, and the Upper Peninsula. In addition, one of the facilitators served the entire state, providing urban planning and zoning consulting to food hubs. The CRFS and MMC convened the eight facilitators bi-monthly through phone calls and face-to-face gatherings held prior to statewide meetings. In 2013, facilitators were added in Benton Harbor and Grand Rapids. Contracts were not renewed in 2014 for facilitators in Shelby County, south-central Michigan, northeast Michigan, and Grand Rapids due to a variety of reasons that included lack of local interest and capacity in food hub development.



Short-term Outcomes and Key Impacts

Evaluation findings show that the Network has been influential in the growth and development of participating food hubs. Based on a survey conducted in March 2014 of Network participants (subscribers to the listserv and anyone who had ever attended a Network convening), 87% of respondents agree or strongly agree that the Network is catalyzing the development of food hubs (see Figure 2). The Network has influenced the development and expansion of existing food hubs by increasing access to financial and technical assistance within an atmosphere of trust, collaboration, and shared knowledge.

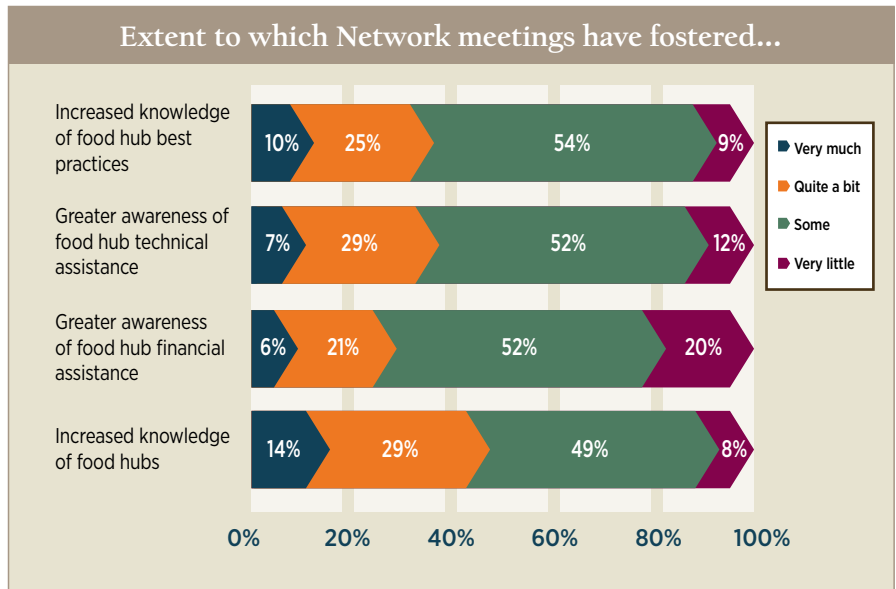
Figure 2. Responses from March 2014 Network Survey



“There were initiatives already bubbling to the surface in the east end and central Upper Peninsula, but it was the very first food hub meeting we were invited to that helped us to see just how far along we were with local food efforts and helped us to solidify them.”—MICHIGAN FOOD HUB

The statewide meetings have proved invaluable for expanding access to new food hub resources. Aggregated responses from Network convening surveys for the period 2012–2014 show the impact of convenings on knowledge of food hub technical assistance, financial assistance, and best practices (Figure 3), with 92% of participants stating that Network convenings increased their knowledge of food hubs. These meetings additionally provide an opportunity for state government agencies to update food hubs on state changes or opportunities that affect them. The quarterly webinars spearheaded and organized by the Network provide additional needs-based technical assistance, and the question-and-answer segments of the webinars provide a venue for furthering communication with and between food hubs.

Figure 3. Impact of Network Statewide Meetings on Knowledge of Food Hubs, Aggregated Responses, 2012–2014



The wealth of knowledge and expertise of Network local food hub facilitators has been an important asset in building the capacity of food hubs. Through the coordination of trainings and facilitating connections to new resources, the facilitators provide valuable support and propel food hubs into new stages of development. Notable examples include learning circles being led by a food hub, a local food hub facilitator, and the MSU Extension in the Lansing area as well as urban zoning planning workshops that allowed the Washtenaw Food Hub to inform zoning changes in Ann Arbor.

Among Network participants, there is a strong interest in increasing access to good food in underserved, low-income populations. Aggregated responses from Network convening surveys for the period 2012–2014 show that 96% of respondents expressed at least some interest in serving these communities, with over half being very interested. Despite this interest, many hubs still believe this work can only be accessed through some form of subsidy, either by using income from food hubs to fund other activities focused on the underserved or by providing space, in-kind resources, or other assistance to other nonprofits that directly work in the food access space.

“The help we’ve gotten from facilitators...has been invaluable. Her [local consultant] expertise really helped us be successful in working with the Ann Arbor township planning commission and getting the changes that we need. We would not be in operation now if we had failed at that.”

—MICHIGAN FOOD HUB

Aligning with the Network’s goal of creating a “measurable increase in healthy food access to low-income communities and vulnerable children,”³ the Network team of the CRFS, MMC, and local food hub facilitators are continuing to find ways to better support hubs in expanding good food access. A lack of capacity for farmers to supply hubs has been identified as a major barrier toward improving access. The implication for the Network is that providing trainings and business planning

“Every time I travel I come back and I’m grateful and realize the amazing partnerships that we have throughout the state - how we are united in our goals and our mission.

As a state to have that with so many people who have so many different types of businesses and are focused and have a shared mission and shared sets of values and goals, that’s completely amazing.”

—MICHIGAN FOOD HUB

support for farmers would be instrumental in addressing this challenge and increasing hub capacity to supply low-income communities. In 2014, the Network initiated a series of financial/business and food safety literacy workshops for farmers that supply hubs in response to this identified barrier. The Network also has been responsive to working with existing hubs to support customized solutions to their information technology needs (purchasing, price sheet development, order processing, web exchange, inventory management, etc.).



³ Center for Regional Food Systems. (2014). Michigan food hub learning and innovation network information sheet. Retrieved from http://foodsystems.msu.edu/uploads/files/FH_consultants_revised_2014.pdf

Short-term Outcomes and Key Impacts, continued

Network participants are quite outspoken in their appreciation of the increased collaboration and creation of a community of shared learning the Network has facilitated. Aggregated responses from Network convening surveys for the period 2012–2104 show that 86% of respondents have seen an increase in collaboration across food hubs as a result of the statewide meetings. Participants from the August 2014 statewide meeting averaged 3.3 new potential partnerships initiated through the convening. The communal space created by the Network allows the opportunity to learn from each other’s work and co-learn solutions to common problems, giving each hub more capacity to troubleshoot and test new approaches. Informed by the Network, a pilot project in the Upper Peninsula led by the UP Food Exchange is conducting a Group Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) food safety pilot. The Network connections and a collaborative, multiple-organization USDA Specialty Crops project made it easier for this pilot project to be a model for food hubs across the state to accelerate learning, implementation, and impact. The Network also benefits from its close partnership with the National Food Hub Collaboration. One Network hub is a participant in the National Good Food Network “study hub” group and shares knowledge gained from that experience with the hubs in the Michigan Food Hub Network. Regular

“The sharing and camaraderie that has been created and developed is worth its weight in gold.”

—MICHIGAN STATE AGENCY EMPLOYEE

interactions facilitated by the Network have led to discussions of cross-promotion and sales assistance between food hubs. This improves financial viability, creates a more visible food hub presence throughout Michigan, and creates greater awareness of the work being done.

The creation of a true community of support among food hubs is perhaps the most unique and passionately noted outcome of the Network to date. Rather than viewing hubs as competitors with each other, the Network has created a community of collaboration and support that fosters energy and enthusiasm for the work being done. As one hub member put it, instead of seeing an environment of competition between food hubs, the Network is creating an environment of “coopetition,” whereby hubs cooperate on parts of the food supply chain and everyone is interested in the success of the larger business network. This collaboration and transparency has been vital to Michigan food hubs in creating conditions that lead to success.

“At a high level, the Network has created the sense of inspiration that it is possible to change the current agriculture paradigm to one that is based on health and good food for all, in all of the dimensions of that—food that’s good for farmers, food that’s good for food insecure people, food that’s good for the planet.” —MICHIGAN FOOD HUB



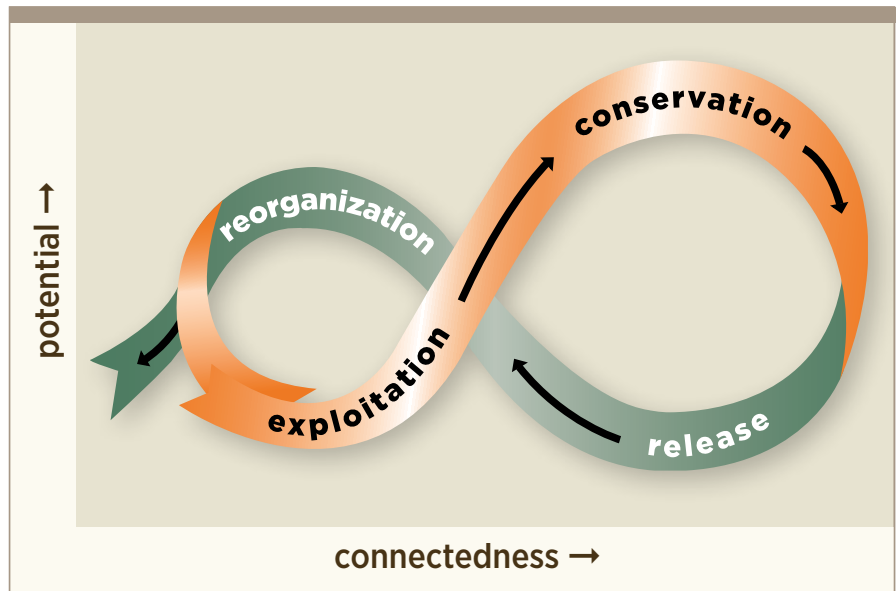
The Future of the Michigan Food Hub Network

As of fall 2014, the Network has hired additional coordinating and technical capacity and, through additional grant funding, will seek and establish new technical consultant contracts to address specific challenges. Additional knowledge about food hub performance through a national benchmark study conducted by Farm Credit, the Wallace Center, and MMC will be invaluable to the learning community, as will be a business network study of food hubs in Michigan and Missouri conducted by faculty at Michigan State University and the University of Missouri. The Value-Added/Regional Food Systems grant program coordinated by MDARD is expected to continue, providing an opportunity for grants to support new models that will address food hub challenges.

Another exciting opportunity for Michigan food hubs will be the launch of the Michigan Good Food Fund (MGFF), expected in early 2015. The MGFF is a public-private partnership loan and grant initiative focused in low-income communities that supports increased food production, expanding access to healthy foods, catalyzing economic development, and creating new permanent jobs. Patterned after healthy food financing funds in California, Pennsylvania, and other states that focused exclusively on food retail, the MGFF is unique in that 25% of its base resources can support non-retail business opportunities such as food hubs. The CRFS, through the Network, will use additional WKKF funds to significantly increase technical assistance to Michigan food hubs to better supply healthy food to low-income communities.

Although our evaluation shows that Michigan food hubs greatly value the Network, Michigan food hubs currently do not have the resources to financially support the Network at this time. A key question for

Figure 4. Four Basic Stages of Ecosystems⁴



this and any food systems network is how to communicate and deliver its value consistently to funders and investors when there is a demonstrated need for the network to continue its services. Networks have their own unique ecological cycles, or ecocycles. The term *panarchy*, arising out of ecological systems research, characterizes complex systems of people and nature as dynamically organized and structured within and across scales of space and time. Panarchy identifies four basic stages of ecosystems represented in Figure 4: exploitation⁵, conservation, release, and reorganization. All sizes and types of ecosystems are said to go through these four stages of a dynamic adaptive cycle, and the same is true with networks. Panarchy theory offers the network builder some tools to understand ecocycles and build more resilient networks (Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2007; Allen, Angeler, Garmestani, Gunderson, & Holling, 2014). According to this theory, collaborative efforts are more resilient when they are partly and simultaneously operating in all four phases of the ecocycle.

⁴ Adapted from "Stages of the Adaptive Cycle" Basic Ecosystem Dynamics". Retrieved September 2014 from: <http://www.sustainablescale.org/ConceptualFramework/UnderstandingScale/MeasuringScale/Panarchy.aspx>

⁵ It's important to note that in this ecological context "exploitation" refers to the ability to take advantage of opportunities; it DOES NOT refer to exploitation that would harm humans or natural ecosystems

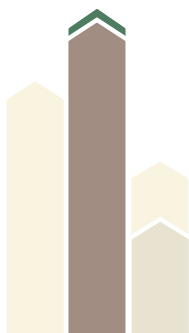
Lessons Learned: Considerations for Starting a Food Hub Network

Since its start in summer 2012, the Michigan Food Hub Network has learned—through trial and error—many lessons about appropriate network structure and strategic management to build the capacity of Michigan food hubs. Here are some key lessons other food hubs and their partners should consider when starting a food hub network.

1. Food hub networks need appropriate financial, social, and intellectual resources to help manage the collaboration infrastructure to foster multiorganizational support. In many cases, foundations and grantmakers put their resources in single organizations conducting projects without realizing the importance that networks play in connecting those projects to the rest of the system. Kania and Kramer (2011) emphasize how critical it is for a dedicated “backbone organization” to worry about and maintain the collaboration infrastructure of any multiorganizational partnership trying to influence systems change. In order for food hubs to thrive, the networks that support them need adequate resources to foster customized learning experiences using multiple technologies. The network organizers must also have the trust of the food hubs and supporting partners. Organizations wishing to play the “backbone” role without the implicit support and blessing of the food hubs and their partner organizations will likely not have the trust needed for success.

2. A food hub network can be most beneficial when food hubs have ready access to coordinated and synchronized technical and financial assistance. The Michigan Food Hub Network launch coincided with the offering of a statewide RFP by MDARD that included potential grant support for food hubs. The state’s investment in these projects gave the Network a set of tangible, credible projects to provide technical assistance to and learn from. The Network space also attracted other potential financial assistance providers who saw the benefit of coordinated technical assistance as a key pre-consideration for future financial assistance. Many Michigan food hubs have since expressed interest in being able to collaborate further on a technological platform. Creating a unified service for all food hubs could increase transparency and promote the sharing of resources among network hubs.

“I think when you have people coming from the west coast, the east coast, the central states, all of whom are doing great work, they come up here and are hearing good things.... I think you’d have to say that we [Michigan] are the leaders of the country...in this work.” —MICHIGAN FOOD HUB





- 3. Networks must be ready to customize communication and technical assistance to the needs of each food hub.** As one Michigan-based food hub practitioner said in 2012, “When you’ve seen one food hub...you’ve seen one food hub.” Networks assisting food hubs must carefully balance the need for generalized information with the need for customized approaches to solving complex food hub challenges.
- 4. Network facilitators should use a servant leadership approach to support the network.** The term servant leader was coined in a 1970 essay by Robert Greenleaf⁶. This philosophy has gained popularity in workplaces and networks worldwide as it reframes the role of leadership as first serving, then leading. The Network’s statewide and local facilitators have played a crucial servant role in supporting and connecting those interested in food hubs with the necessary resources and expertise to further their progress and expansion. These facilitators have done so by listening closely to food hub needs and responding in a manner that optimizes benefits for all involved.
- 5. Local consultants and educators that serve food hub networks need to have adequate technical, business, and facilitation skills.** Facilitators with high levels of regional food systems knowledge and experience have been better able to engage and support food hubs, providing and connecting them with essential resources. Nonprofit, local and state government, and university extension staff interested in supporting food hub growth within a network structure should look to where there are local gaps in expertise and try to gain that expertise (or know where and how to deploy that expertise) so it is readily available at the local level.
- 6. An environment of collaboration and the creation of spaces for collective problem solving are crucial to creating a robust food hub learning community.** While individual food hubs receive various benefits from the Network, the environment of collaboration is what has propelled all of the Michigan food hubs into a new level of development. This collaboration has allowed them to unify their efforts to create statewide momentum, increase visibility, and promote all of their businesses as a whole. This development would not have occurred if each hub worked in isolation.
- 7. Constant evaluation and revision of strategies is necessary to adapt to unanticipated needs and challenges that arise.** The Network has continuously included a process of participant feedback and adaptations of the model, which has contributed greatly to its continued usefulness and success. Developing and guiding a perpetual learning and feedback process where further improvements can easily be gleaned from participants and acted upon is essential to allow hub participants to direct or redirect any high-functioning network to provide higher levels of support.
- 8. Network practitioners should view their network’s progress and evolution through the lens of an ecocycle rather than a lifecycle.** Ecocycles are different from lifecycles in that birth, growth, and death all are occurring simultaneously. Seeing networks through an ecocycle lens provides a better understanding of the challenging nature of collaborative work and a recognition and acceptance that food systems change across a network is very complex and chaotic.

⁶ Spears, L. C. (2005). The understanding and practice of servant leadership. School of Leadership Studies, Regent University. Retrieved July 2014 from http://www.regent.edu/acad/global/publications/sl_proceedings/2005/spears_practice.pdf

▶ EPILOGUE: INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP WELL-BEING AND NETWORKS

We all know the value of teamwork and cooperation in making a project or business run smoothly. In order to best understand under what conditions food hubs can best supply low-income communities and what will help people want to change their diet once they have regular access to that food, it's important to understand the role that human flourishing plays in our everyday lives. Flourishing means living within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience (Keyes, 2002). Epidemiological research suggests that fewer than 20% of U.S. adults are flourishing (Keyes, 2002). A predictor of flourishing in individuals and groups is positivity—the positive end of feelings, sentiments, and attitudes such as gratitude, appreciation, and liking, versus a contrasting set of feelings that are often associated with negativity (contempt, deep skepticism, disdain, dislike, etc.).

Although the food hubs and supporting partners that form the core of the Michigan Food Hub Network were not given a positivity test, there has been a clear theme in all of our recurring surveys and evaluation efforts of the importance and influence of positive intention and deep respect in building an effective support system for food hubs. Facing what seemed to be insurmountable challenges in developing food hubs, core participants in the Network relied on these important attributes as a core part of their strategy.



Structural racism within the food system in the United States and in Michigan continues to persist, and the reasons for its continued proliferation are complex. It is beyond the scope of this publication to provide a thorough examination of racism in our food system; for a more robust investigation, we encourage the reader to review Liu (2012) and Kelly, Electricis, Land, & Bhandal (2012).

We do, however, want to point out one thread linking the importance of flourishing, our work in food hub networks, and racism. Research studies have shown that, in general, people are less likely to recognize and distinguish people of a different race than recognize and distinguish people of their own race (Meissner & Brigham, 2001). Johnson and Frederickson (2005) found that positive emotions eliminate own-race bias in facial recognition. In other words, the more positive the emotional state people have going into an experiment to recognize differences in faces across race, the more likely a person will reduce their own-race bias and integrate all elements of the face rather than look for race-based features.



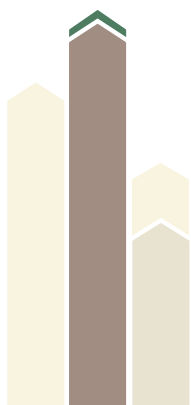
“If we lose love and self-respect for each other, this is how we finally die.”

—MAYA ANGELOU

It is naïve to think that all people have an equal opportunity to be raised and work in an environment that resonates with positivity and encourages flourishing. For example, people who continually face economic hardship and structural racism may not be exposed to a higher ratio of positive versus negative emotions and experiences. The mental health and attitudes of these individuals, and the groups and individuals they closely interact with, may be a significant factor in how they handle the many stressors in daily life and whether or not they are able to take full advantage of good food access.

Having access to good food and a culturally appropriate education program about that food will likely increase success but will not always lead to individuals making appropriate decisions about healthy diets. Nurturing the overall well-being of those low-income individuals within the context of their family and community needs must go hand-in-hand with increased good food access. On the ground, this means being even more intentional about the messy, complicated work of respectfully crossing project, business, and cultural boundaries to connect all the elements of good food in situations that increase good food access,

encourage individual and group flourishing, and promote racial equity. At the local, state, and national levels, it means continuing to advocate for approaches that promote an equity-driven growth model that can create new good food businesses such as food hubs while ensuring that people of all races and economic conditions share equally in the benefits. Only when everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed will the real promise of good food be realized and the full benefits of place-based food hubs supplying that good food be recognized and valued.



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