

# CREATING *Change*



## in the Food System:

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*The role of regional food networks in Iowa*



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*Rich Pirog initially conceived this paper, wrote the first draft of (executive summary and introductory) pages 1-10, identified and contacted reviewers for the peer critique process, coordinated publication of the paper, and hired and worked with the design consultant to design and format it. Corry Bregendahl designed and developed the evaluation instruments, conducted interviews and administered surveys, and collected and analyzed the data. She wrote the first draft of pages 11-27 (analysis, discussion, and conclusions). Both authors edited the entire manuscript at all stages, and pulled together photos and graphics for the publication.*



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### Executive Summary

Using Kania and Kramer's (2011) notion of collective impact, we present a case study of an integrated effort to build long-term local and regional food commerce in Iowa using a community of practice approach. Kania and Kramer contend that five conditions must exist within a network of organizations in order to effect meaningful change. Those conditions include:

- *Common agenda across organizations;*
- *Shared measurement systems;*
- *Mutually reinforcing activities that create synergy rather than redundancy;*
- *Continuous communication across and within organizations; and*
- *Backbone support organizations that can plan, manage, and support the initiative so it runs smoothly.*

Nearly a decade ago, leadership at the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture and its Iowa food systems partner organizations realized that the technical, educational, research, and financial needs of local food farmers, food entrepreneurs, and community leaders had to be addressed in a more coordinated, cohesive fashion to build long-lasting local and regional food commerce. With additional funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Wallace Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Iowa State University, the SYSCO Corporation, and several others, a network of food and agriculture working groups called Value Chain Partnerships was created in 2002. The number of working groups in Value Chain Partnerships grew steadily through 2010. The working groups in Value Chain Partnerships used a community of practice approach. Communities of practice are groups of people in organizations who come together to understand and share their work in new ways.

The Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG), one of the first three working groups created through Value Chain Partnerships in 2003, functioned as an umbrella network for Iowans working in the local and regional food systems arena. After three years of operation using an issues-based approach, RFSWG underwent a transformation and shifted its focus to a geographically-based approach, namely, one that engaged partners working in specific regions of the state.

The Leopold Center provided its first RFSWG seed grant to the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition. By spring 2011, 16 geographically based groups had received Leopold Center support covering 83 of Iowa's 99 counties. These groups continue to meet regularly as of March, 2012. After eight years of work, evaluation of RFSWG shows that it has:

- *Increased partnerships and collaboration across groups and organizations;*
- *Increased trust across groups and organizations;*
- *Increased local and state credibility for local food systems work;*
- *Facilitated the creation and implementation of policy and funding recommendations (via the Iowa Food and Farm Plan);*
- *Built capacity of local food groups to take on significant challenges;*
- *Brought new funding opportunities to local groups across the state; and*
- *Helped to leverage funds.*

With Leopold Center and local leadership, the 16 local food groups in the RFSWG developed a common agenda and to this day, continue to share information and resources to carry out that agenda. They explored and continue to explore shared measurement systems (local food sales and purchases) that by 2013 will aggregate common indicators across all 16 groups to present a statewide impact story. The RFSWG groups developed, through continuous communication, reinforcing activities that create synergy in making each other's work additive. The Leopold Center, over a period of eight years, developed its capacity to function as a backbone support organization to create a space for RFSWG to grow and flourish. Analysis of the RFSWG as a case study is valuable as it embodies the five conditions that Kania and Kramer (2011) state must be present to realize collective impact in strengthening Iowa's local food system.



## Growth of local food systems in the United States

Local and regional food sales in the United States have grown dramatically in the past two decades. In a recent report released by the USDA, the sale of local foods in the U.S. grossed nearly \$5 billion in 2008 (Low and Vogel, 2011). According to the report, farms marketing food through intermediated channels such as grocery stores, restaurants, and institutions reported \$2.7 billion in local food sales in 2008. However, growth also is occurring in direct-to-consumer channels, otherwise known as direct markets. The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship reports that direct market sales increased 92 percent from 2004 to 2009 for a total of \$38.4 million in direct sales in 2009 (Otto, 2011). The number of farmers' markets in the United States has increased from 340 in 1970 to more than 7,000 in 2011 (USDA-AMS, 2011). In 1990, there were approximately 60 community supported agriculture (CSA) enterprises in the United States (Groh and McFadden, 1990). CSAs increased 66 times to more than 4,000 outlets by 2007, with a total of 12,500 participating farms (USDA Ag Census, 2007). The number of farm to school programs, which use local farms as food suppliers for school meal programs, increased to 2,095 in 2009, up from 400 in 2004 (National Farm to School Network, 2010).

In the past five years making the popular case for support of local food commerce in the United States has generally expanded from a focus on potential environmental benefits to one that includes economic and community benefits. Economic analyses in Iowa, Ohio, and Michigan have shown modest but significant advances in labor income and new jobs created through increases in local food production, marketing, and sales (Swenson, 2010; Masi, Schaller, and Shuman, 2010; and Connor et al., 2008). In 2010, Otto reported that \$38.4 million in farmers' market sales in Iowa yielded a \$71 million impact on the state's economy and generated 374 direct jobs and 200 indirect jobs. In addition to economic and community impacts, increasing healthy local food consumption (in particular local fruits, vegetables, and whole grains) is viewed as a pathway to reduce childhood obesity and expand food access in underserved areas (Colasanti et al., 2010).





## Accelerating Iowa's local food movement

The Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University is a research and education center with statewide programs to develop sustainable agricultural practices that are both profitable and conserve natural resources. As early as 1996 the Center began to solicit and fund Iowa food system research and outreach projects as part of its competitive grants program. In 1999, the Iowa Secretary of Agriculture responded to requests from farmers and community leaders to convene a local foods task force for the state. One of the key recommendations of the task force—creating a statewide food policy council—became reality in 2000 with an executive order by Iowa's governor. That the local food movement in Iowa has grown as rapidly (or even more quickly) as parallel movements in other states is something of a paradox, given that Iowa is a rural state dominated by commodity agriculture. Iowa ranks first nationally in corn, soybean, hog, and egg production (USDA Agricultural Statistics Service, 2009). Yet it boasts the third highest number of farmers' markets per capita in the nation (O'Hara, 2011). In Iowa, the growth of the local food movement has been anchored by a strong collaboration between university, state agency, and community groups that include Iowa State University (including ISU Extension), the farmer-based Practical Farmers of Iowa, the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Drake University, the Iowa Food Systems Council, Iowa's Resource Conservation and Development councils, and the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship.



## Sustaining and growing Iowa's local food system

Relatively strong institutional, organizational, and agency collaboration in Iowa has not always been the norm, nor did it develop unaided. Development and evolution of a common agenda has been key, as has careful maintenance of those relationships. After several years of funding local food systems projects in the 1990s, staff at the Leopold Center began to notice a pattern realized by funders in other states. Efforts in broadening public awareness of local food succeeded during the grant period, but such efforts tended to decline and/or dissipate when funding ended. In addition, the technical, educational, research, and financial needs of local food farmers, food entrepreneurs, and community leaders were not being met in a coordinated, cohesive fashion. Farmers and small food businesses often were faced with the high transaction costs of following leads and referrals across organizations (both agency and non-profit). Iowa non-profit and higher education organizations tended to compete rather than collaborate with each other, especially for grant dollars from the Leopold Center and other sources to implement projects. Although significant impacts were realized in those early years of Iowa's local food movement, they tended to be uncoordinated and limited in scope.

The Leopold Center, like many other funders, was aware that funding individual projects not connected strategically to each other and to other key influential food system actors (such as financial institutions), would not create significant change in the food system. Kania and Kramer (2011) also contend that funders who continue to support fragmented, isolated initiatives will not solve many of the social problems in today's complex world. Kania and Kramer identify five conditions that must be present to achieve the level of synchronization and alignment needed to achieve lasting and meaningful collective impact:

- *Common agenda across organizations;*
- *Shared measurement systems;*
- *Mutually reinforcing activities that create synergy rather than redundancy;*
- *Continuous communication across and within organizations; and*
- *Backbone support organizations that can plan, manage, and support the initiative so it runs smoothly.*



These five conditions must exist across a network of groups and individual actors who through shared experiences have built adequate trust with each other. Research has shown that high trust environments tend to bring stability, increasing the flow of communication and reducing the level of control needed to achieve goals (Gibb, 1978; Smith and Ward, 2003). Trust, while often overlooked as a “soft” and inconsequential matter for business consideration, is the foundation upon which many successful private food enterprises thrive. The principles of Gibb’s Trust Theory (Gibb, 1978) have been used as a guide for the board of Organic Valley (“1643 owners strong”), a farmer-owned cooperative based in Wisconsin (Peterman, 2011). The company supplies certified organic farm products such as dairy products, soy milk, produce, juice, meat, and eggs to consumers across the United States. The Leopold Center and several of its key Iowa partners agreed that building trust across private and public partners was essential for achieving changes in Iowa’s food system. At the same time, a gradual shift occurred in the Center’s food systems program, which evolved from a focus on funding individual projects to a focus on building and convening networks. The expectation was that such a strategy is more likely to build trust among collaborating partners.

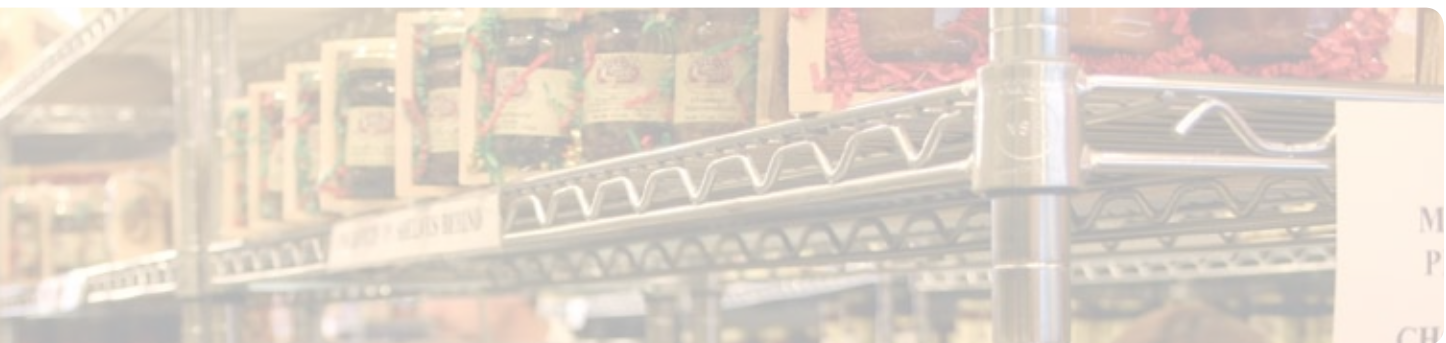
Although working via networks is essential to achieve “collective impact,” networks can differ in their communications and operations structure, level of risk, trust, and time commitment. Vandeventer and Mandell (2007) characterize three types of networks:

**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 networks have the highest level of risk, but the greatest chance for system change or reform.

The Leopold Center made a conscious decision to change its approach to supporting food systems work by functioning not only as a funder, but as a backbone organization as described by Kania and Kramer (2011) to build trust and foster networks that generate collective impact. In addition to funding food system projects, the Leopold Center began to actively leverage its funds to bring in additional resources to share with partners and create a set of (as defined by Vandeventer and Mandell) coordinating and in some cases collaborating networks to encourage change in Iowa’s food system. That process began with the creation of the Value Chain Partnerships project.



## Value Chain Partnerships

Value Chain Partnerships (VCP) is an Iowa-based network of food and agriculture working groups. The conceptual bedrock for the VCP network became the working definition of a “value chain.” Stevenson and 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.” Although the terms “value web” or “value network” are preferred to value chain by some in the local food movement, the core principal remains the same; all terms refer to a shift in power by emphasizing a more equitable arrangement of risk, responsibility, and rewards among food system partners.

With this in mind, the VCP network began in January 2002 with the creation of the Pork Niche Market Working Group (PNMWG). Those associated with the VCP used the term “working group” with partners because the term is widely understood<sup>1</sup>. Start-up funding was secured from five organizations, including the Leopold Center, to hire a coordinator from the non-profit organization Practical Farmers of Iowa. The coordinator convened stakeholders in the niche pork supply chain. The PNMWG brought together niche pork companies, university and state agency representatives, and farm-based organizations such as the Iowa Pork Producers Association.

Although it was publicly called a working group, the PNMWG functioned as a community of practice. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002:4) define communities of practice as “groups of people in organizations who come together to share what they know, to learn from one another regarding some aspects of their work, and to provide a social context for that work.” The PNMWG focused on helping individual pork producers and niche pork companies address challenges in building effective and profitable niche pork value chains.



In 2002, funding was secured from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s Higher Education-Community Partnerships Initiative along with matches from the Leopold Center, Iowa State University and the Sysco Corporation to expand capacity for the PNMWG and to develop new working groups to assist other Iowa-based food and fiber value chains. Over the next four years, Value Chain Partnerships would start the

Regional Food Systems Working Group and two other working groups to support emerging markets in renewable fibers and organic flax. Each of these groups also functioned as a community of practice. As part of the VCP network, coordinators from each working group met together monthly to share coordination and facilitation lessons learned and to build new knowledge across the working groups. With additional funding from the Wallace Center for Sustainable Agriculture along with matches from the Leopold Center and Iowa State University in 2006, the VCP network expanded to include working groups focused on Fruits and Vegetables, Small Meat Processing, Farm Energy, and Food Access and Health. The Renewable Fibers

<sup>1</sup> According to [www.businessdictionary.com](http://www.businessdictionary.com), a working group is a collection of individuals that come together to achieve a stated objective.

**Figure 1: Value Chain Partnership Working Groups in 2010.**



(also called Bioeconomy) Working Group and the Flax Working Group were closed in 2007, due in part to the difficulty of profitably producing quality products under Iowa farming conditions. Figure 1 depicts the Value Chain Partnership Working Groups in 2010.

During this period of change in the Value Chain Partnerships network, a Fortune 500 business consultant was brought in from 2006 through 2008 to inform the work as a grant requirement from the Wallace Center for Sustainable Agriculture. The objective of this partnership was to increase the project's capacity to brand and market its core competencies after Wallace grant funding ended. The consultant worked with the coordinators of all working groups to assess the VCP network's strengths and to develop a set of core functions for VCP and its working groups. Four core functions of the working groups were identified. Each served as:

- *Information hubs;*
- *Catalysts for cooperation;*
- *Magnets for funding, and*
- *Scouts for new opportunities.*

These core functions served as the foundation for building the Value Chain Partnerships brand with farmers, food businesses, non-profit organizations, and funders.

## The Regional Food Systems Working Group

The Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG) began in 2003 with a needs assessment by Iowa local food practitioners. Based on the feedback, organizers from more than 20 Iowa organizations articulated the RFSWG mission to:

*Support education, conduct research, and facilitate partnerships to increase investment and support of community-based, sustainable and environmentally responsible regional food enterprises.*

The group defined a regional food system as supporting long-term connections between farmers and consumers while helping to meet the health, social, economic, and environmental needs of communities within that region. No specific farm-to-consumer social or physical distance or assignment of political (state and county) boundaries was used in the definition, although individuals recruited to participate in RFSWG were primarily from Iowa.

An assessment of RFSWG's work at the end of 2005 revealed that the core functions of the group were too broad and not well understood or relevant enough; therefore, the goals and strategies of the group needed focus. As a result, RFSWG underwent a transformation in 2006 and shifted its focus from an issues-based group to one that engaged partners working in specific geographic areas of the state. Financial support for this effort started with a 2006 pilot grant to the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition to develop a strategic plan for food systems in that region. Soon afterward, competitive grants were awarded to two more regional food groups representing multiple counties in southeast and southwest Iowa.

These three regional food groups were asked to collect local data that documented progress (such as increased local sales by farmers) in building local food systems. They also were required to send at least two representatives to actively participate in RFSWG meetings. Additional regional food groups were funded by the Leopold Center using a competitive process based on the group's local support, leadership capacity, and willingness to actively participate in the RFSWG community of practice. Existing groups and the RFSWG coordinator each had a vote to determine which new regional food groups would receive seed funds to increase ownership and build the decision making and leadership capacity of the RFSWG group as a whole.

RFSWG met on a quarterly basis, with monthly one-hour group calls made between meetings among key local group leaders. The RFSWG coordinator and the local leaders jointly determined meeting agendas. Quarterly RFSWG meeting attendees included farmers, educators from ISU Extension and non-profit organizations, state agency representatives, mayors, city planners, bankers, dietitians, local economic development officials, county supervisors, and others. Meetings were structured to allow adequate time

for networking and to update other attendees on progress made in building local food commerce. As the key backbone organization, the Leopold Center convened the RFSWG meetings based on local leader schedules. Through the winter of 2011, the Leopold Center covered round-trip mileage for one vehicle for each regional food group participating; the Center also provided a local lunch to participants.

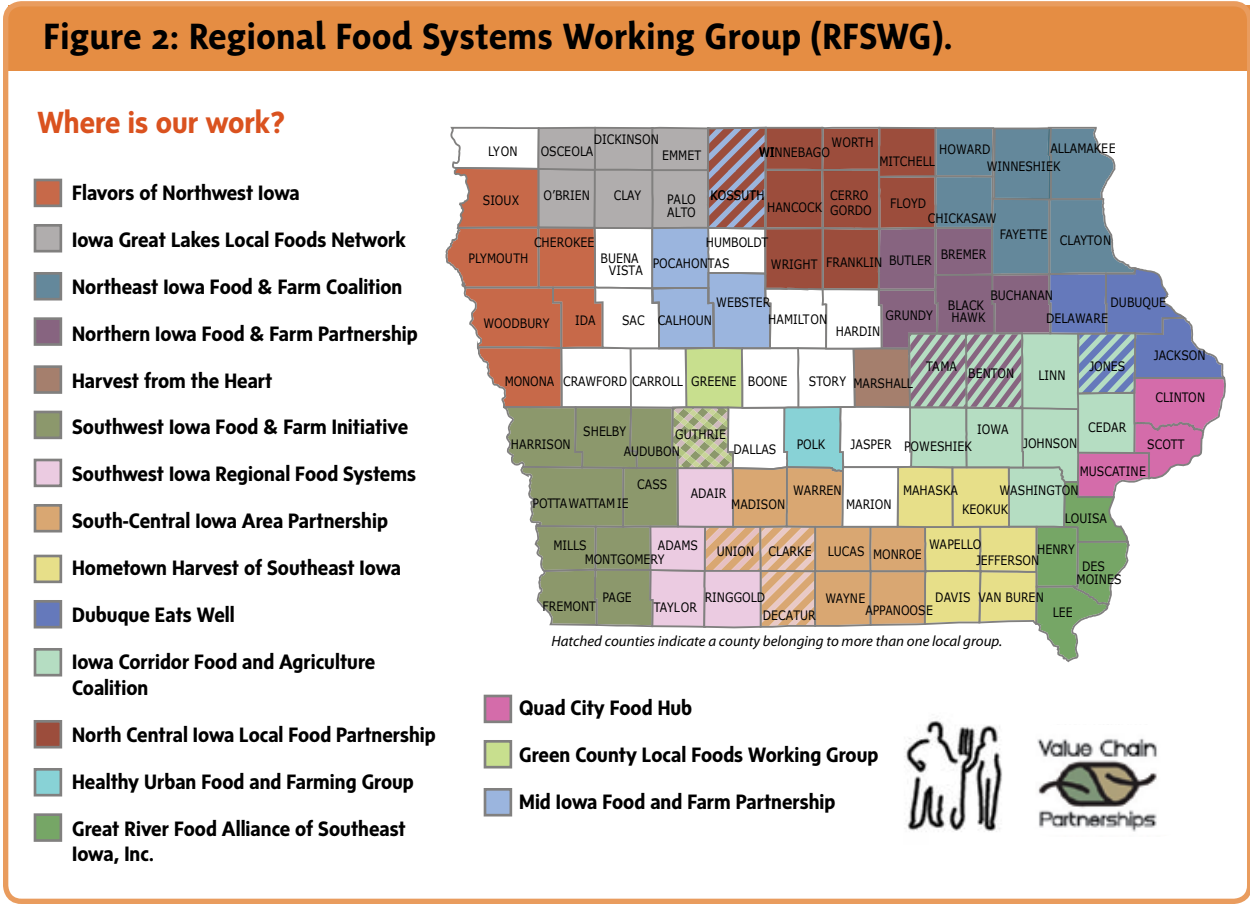


By early 2009 there were nine groups representing 55 of Iowa’s 99 counties. As of April 2011, 16 groups representing 83 of Iowa’s counties were participating (Figure 2, Appendix). As the number of RFSWG local groups grew, so did participation in the quarterly meetings. RFSWG meeting attendance climbed from an average of 35 people in 2005 to more than 100 in 2010.

As new groups joined RFSWG, established group leaders acted as mentors, sharing lessons learned and strategies to overcome challenges in building local food systems. By 2009, five of the regional food groups hired local food coordinators with Leopold Center and other grants, including local funds. These food coordinators began to schedule their own monthly calls to share experiences and find ways to collaborate on mutually agreed-upon goals.

When several Iowa legislators began to hold meetings and summits in their districts in fall 2009 to discuss local food issues, they became aware of the RFSWG local food groups, and the role the Leopold Center played as funder, convener, network-builder, and catalyst. In April 2010, the Iowa legislature passed an amendment mandating that the Leopold Center develop a Local Food and Farm Plan, complete with funding and policy recommendations, to strengthen local food commerce across the state. Without the influence of the growing RFSWG network, it is unlikely that the legislators would have chosen the Leopold Center to lead this task.

Creating systems change to move towards a more community-based food paradigm in Iowa (let alone the United States) requires an unprecedented level of collaboration, communication, and trust building across organizations, food businesses and industries, educational institutions, and government. The remainder of this narrative documents how RFSWG has influenced and enhanced the “collective impact” of Iowa’s local and regional food system efforts.



## RFSWG BENEFITS AND IMPACTS

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A primary goal of the Value Chain Partnerships and the Regional Food Systems Working Group evaluation was to measure and document the impacts of the work. A secondary goal was to use the information gathered to inform the process of building and managing working groups using a communities of practice framework. Although most grant cycles last no longer than three or four years, personnel and systems were in place to conduct ongoing evaluation for nearly nine years thanks to a critical consecutive funding stream from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Wallace Center for Sustainable Agriculture, and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. This unique circumstance allowed us to delve more deeply into the long-term impacts of the project. However, the evaluation methods used for measuring changes in systems are not those typically used for measuring short-term, individual level changes. We examined not only individual changes in knowledge, skills, awareness, attitudes, and behaviors but also collective indicators of change occurring within participating organizations, institutions, and agencies, and in the case of RFSWG, the network as a whole. We reviewed it as part of a larger picture—examining how short- and medium-term changes in individuals led to changes in organization and institutional culture and ultimately collective action that supports growth and development of local and regional food systems.

The primary external funder from 2006-2009 (the Wallace Center) advocated measuring success in terms of how well VCP and the working groups contributed to individual participant and/or business profitability and financial stability, and how well participating organizations and individuals were able to leverage new grants or investments as a result of the project. These are considered key tenets of financial sustainability necessary for continuing the work. However, financial measures of individual, business, and organizational success fail to adequately account for the collective capacity to change the culture of individual, business, and organizational partners to focus less on securing financial resources for private use and more on securing financial resources for the field or larger “collective” (noting Vandeventer and Mandell’s collaborating networks that reallocate resources across the network rather than within organizations). In this case, the field or “collective” included all public, private, and civic organizations, institutions, agencies, foundations, businesses, and partners working to address local and regional food system issues. This pointed to a strong need to document changes in trust and the way people and organizations relate to one another over time across and within organizations, agencies, businesses, and institutions. Thus our evaluation looked at what influence those changing interactions have on the services and assistance provided to farmers, food businesses, and policies created to foster food systems change.





## RATIONALE

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We already established that communities of practice (CoPs) are groups of people with similar interests and goals that come together to share information, learn from each other, and/or accomplish mutual goals (Wenger et al., 2002). By virtue of this definition and the networking that must take place to achieve these goals, CoPs can neither exist nor flourish without extensive social interaction. Since the purpose of the VCP working groups has been to facilitate information exchange and collaboration to foster local and regional food value chains, it was imperative to analyze the nature and extent to which this takes place through interaction. The evaluation therefore measured the degree to which participants benefit from CoP participation and the way in which the working groups were effecting change in value chains by assisting individuals, businesses, organizations, agencies, and institutions. The evaluation focused heavily on assessing the relationships that were formed among working group members, the quality of those relationships, and the result of those interactions.

As Kania and Kramer have noted (2011:39), shifting from an emphasis on isolated impact to collective impact “requires a systemic approach to social impact that focuses on the relationships between organizations and the progress toward shared objectives.” As Kramer noted in “Catalytic Philanthropy” (2009:34), “mobilizing and coordinating stakeholders is messier and slower than funding a compelling grant request from a single organization.” So, too, is evaluation of such efforts. This is particularly true for RFSWG, which involved more than 300 participants from more than 50 different formal organizations over eight years. We intentionally pursued an evaluation process that would help us learn what happened as a result of a coordinated effort and why it happened, hypothesizing that changing relationships leading to increased trust were largely responsible for many of the subsequent outcomes and impacts.

We used Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to inform our evaluation approach. AI replaces a problem or deficit-based focus with a solutions focus, prompts people to reflect on what is working, and deconstructs the process of what is working to help understand the key components unique to a location or organization that can be used to grow more success. A whole body of literature exists on the value of this approach. Appreciative questions are not about asking people what they like, but rather inquiring about where they find worth, quality and significance in a program or action, how they might increase that worth, and how they honor some aspect of it in their current and future work (Preskill and Catsambas, 2006).

Appreciative Inquiry has been pivotal in informing social science work that follows in this tradition—namely, the principles of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS). POS focuses on dynamics leading to successful individual and organizational performance. POS investigates “positive deviance” or ways in which individuals and organizations thrive and prosper based on the premise that solutions to community challenges reside within a community rather than outside resources (Cameron and Caza, 2004). Given the grassroots nature of the regional food systems work in Iowa, we found it fitting to use this approach not to gloss over inevitable failures or flops but to identify moments of “positive deviance” and focus on, learn from, and share what works and why.

We therefore asked participants to reflect on their experiences in the RFSWG over time. While gathering their responses, we collected insightful and important data on the work partners had done, how it changed over time, and why it changed. Most of the interview respondents provided glimpses of localized social conditions, processes, and politics leading to systemic change, which we realized had to be included in a comprehensive narrative about the evolution of RFSWG. What follows is a description of the evaluation methodology, highlights of lessons learned, and how our evaluation confirms and enhances the thesis of “collective impact” advanced by Kania and Kramer (2011).

## METHODOLOGY

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In 2007, 20 in-depth telephone interviews were conducted with selected RFSWG participants. The script (mostly open-ended questions) was e-mailed to respondents before the interview so they could consider their answers in advance. One evaluator conducted all 20 interviews to maintain consistency and reduce response errors. The evaluator asked respondents to describe impacts that had taken place in the last year that they could attribute to their participation in the working groups. The telephone interview format made it possible to ask probing and clarifying questions as necessary to understand the background and context for responses. The interview response rate was 100 percent, with the average session lasting approximately 45 minutes.

Criteria for selecting respondents in this purposive sample included length of time respondents had participated in the working group as well as diversity of representation. We selected respondents who were active participants (attending multiple meetings for more than two years) since we expected these participants to have a greater understanding and set of impacts to report, as opposed to those who attended only a few meetings. We also selected respondents representing many sectors to ensure that diverse perspectives would surface. We interviewed participants ranging from farmers to representatives of organizations providing support services across the value chain.

We developed a survey using the 2007 qualitative data to help expand our sample to include all active RFSWG participants and quantify their responses. In fall 2008, we contacted 70 people who had attended at least two RFSWG meetings in the past two years. We received 37 responses after two electronic (e-mail) contacts, for a response rate of 53 percent.

## Analysis and Discussion

### KEY BENEFITS

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Based on telephone interviews with 20 long-time RFSWG participants, key benefits of RFSWG participation are summarized in Table 1, using the four core functions of VCP as a frame.

*"[The Regional Food System Working Group] is a place where people are coming together, sharing ideas, talking to each other, and making connections. Better projects, better activities, and better coordination [are] happening as a result."  
—RFSWG Participant*



**Table 1. Summary of Key RFSWG Benefits**

<b>CoP Functions</b>	<b>Key Benefits for Producers and Businesses</b>	<b>Key Benefits for Organizations</b>
<p><b>Information hubs</b> that create, capture, document, leverage, and deploy knowledge as technical assistance to create solutions for value chain partners</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater awareness of a wider range of support providers and services</li> <li>• Greater awareness of and access to research-based information</li> <li>• Access to larger “portfolio of expertise to draw from” and “tacit knowledge”--information unavailable anywhere else (i.e., not in print or electronic form)</li> <li>• Improved business skills and competencies</li> <li>• Opportunities to participate in research that creates new knowledge used to inform the industry/work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better understanding of challenges facing producers and businesses</li> <li>• Greater awareness of complementary technical assistance offered by other participating organizations</li> <li>• More effective organizations and employees due to improved knowledge and work competencies</li> <li>• Access to tools others are using to engage organizations in food systems work</li> <li>• Participating organizations are better able to manage “local politics” associated with food systems/ sustainable agriculture work</li> </ul>
<p><b>Catalysts for cooperation</b> across diverse interests to create solutions for food and fiber producers and businesses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater sense of teamwork and low-level cooperation (low-risk information-sharing)</li> <li>• Opportunities for “higher-level” cooperation (where businesses share some risk, resources, and profits)</li> <li>• Access to support network</li> <li>• Private sector access to no- or low-cost public sector support and services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More coordinated use of existing organizational and state resources</li> <li>• Participating organizations collaborate more with other groups and recognize other organizations as assets/potential partners</li> <li>• Better relationships with unlikely partners, including commodity producers, people in other disciplines, and non-profits</li> <li>• Breaking down organizational silos and negative organizational stereotypes</li> </ul>
<p><b>Magnets</b> that attract funding and leverage, channel, and distribute funding for research and development of differentiated products</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Private sector links with research agendas and consultants who initiate work that benefits producers and businesses</li> <li>• Participating organizations invest more resources such as money and staff time on work that supports the industry and benefits producers than otherwise possible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participating organizations collaborating with unlikely partners, including commodity groups, are more successful at receiving grants</li> <li>• Increased credibility when identifying and engaging new sources of support</li> <li>• Participating organizations are better able to leverage their own organizational resources to commit more staff time and resources to food systems work</li> </ul>
<p><b>Scouts</b> that identify emerging value chain opportunities with high potential to deliver economic benefits to sustainable agriculture stakeholders</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater business viability due to better support and decision making</li> <li>• Increased access to new markets</li> <li>• Increased sales</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants engage elected officials and government agency staff in conversations emphasizing the need for policy to support the work, producers, businesses, and communities</li> </ul>

Source: Bregendahl, 2010

## KEY OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS

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Benefits that individuals and organizations experience as a result of participation can be viewed as outcomes, but individual respondents would not necessarily identify many outcomes we were able to measure as a direct benefit (such as development of the Iowa Local Food and Farm Plan). This section describes in detail the outcomes and longer-term systems change impacts associated with the work of the RFSWG. These include the:

- *Development of strong, **productive networks** that increase the ability of the working group to leverage support for regional food systems work;*
- *Increased credibility that helps change the customs and practices of supporting organizations, institutions, and government;*
- *Increased organizational efficiency and capacity of participating groups; and*
- *Increased influence on public policies that better support regional food systems.*

We found that even minor changes in each bullet listed above fostered significant changes of the same over time, gaining momentum as relationships and trust within and beyond the group deepened. The interview data provide evidence that nurturing strong, productive relationships is necessary for recruiting new partners and mobilizing related resources to gain support. As support grows along with the recognition that regional food systems can bring opportunities to communities, new partners get needed support from administrators, constituents, board members, and others to join the effort to create systems change. When new partners get involved, they bring in additional resources at local, regional and statewide levels, generating even more public interest and attention that attract more partners and resources. Together, these factors create a snowball effect that is increasing the acceptance of local and regional food systems as a means for enhancing resilience of farms and communities.

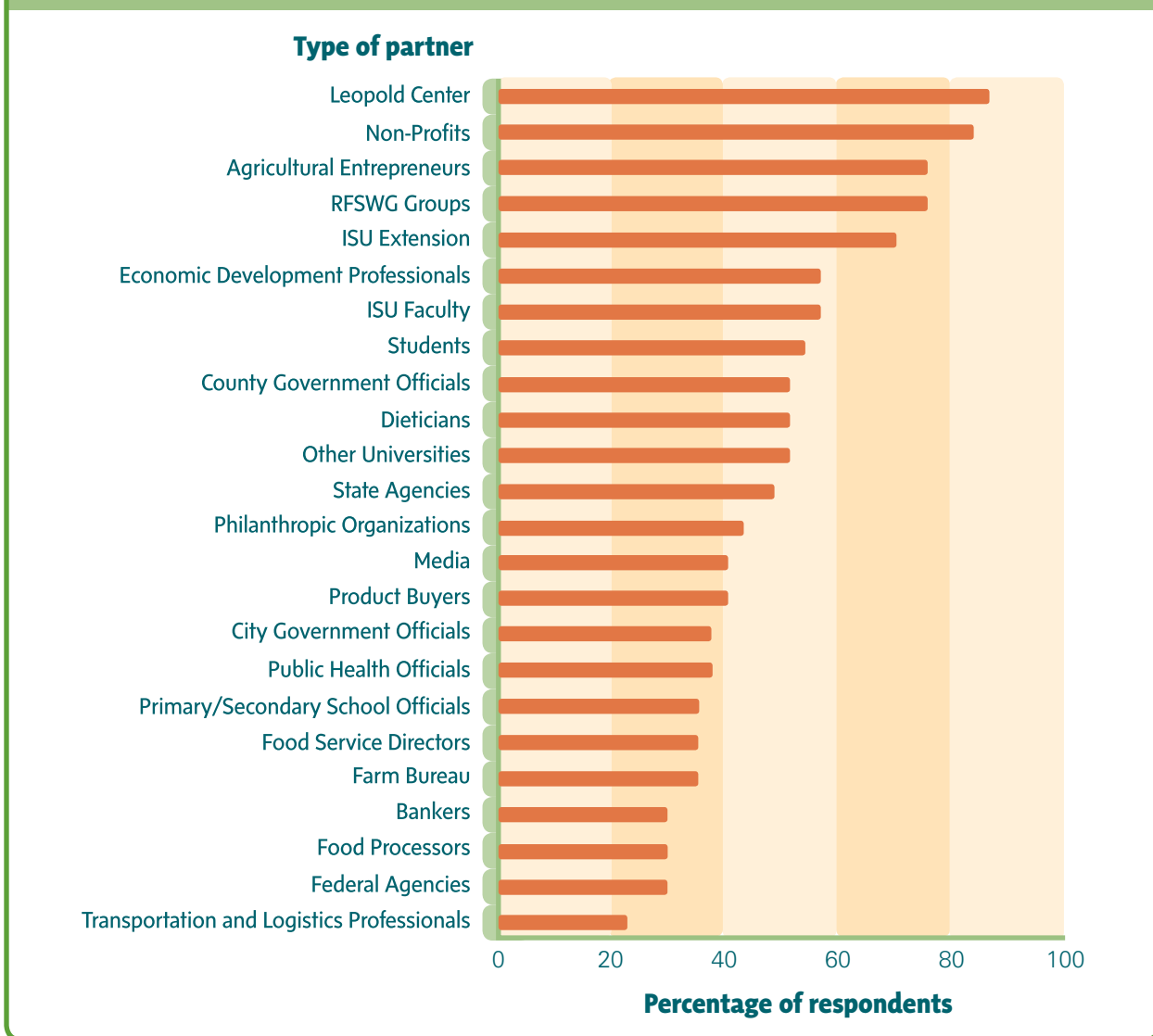
## BUILDING STRONG, TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

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Nearly all of the RFSWG respondents surveyed in 2008 said they had developed new relationships in the past year as a result of participation in RFSWG. Figure 3 shows a list of the new partners and the percentage of respondents who claimed them as partners. We can see that ISU Extension, the regional food groups, non-profits, and the Leopold Center have benefited greatly from the RFSWG with at least 70 percent of respondents claiming them as new partners. Furthermore, of those respondents who already knew someone in RFSWG, virtually all agreed that existing relationships had become stronger as a result of RFSWG participation.



**Figure 3. New partnerships by percent of respondents**



Source: Bregendahl, 2010

We asked questions about new and improved relationships to determine whether this might relate to actual collaboration. Three in four respondents said they had either initiated or participated in new collaborations or projects as a result of RFSWG involvement. Among the 75 percent who had engaged in new collaborations, one-third indicated they were able to leverage funding as a result of the collaboration. Respondents to the 2008 survey cited leveraging a total of \$754,470 from producers or producers' associations, philanthropies, foundations, University-based non-profits, Farm Bureau, and government agencies. As of mid-2011, RFSWG participants have leveraged an estimated \$2 million in funding to support their local regional food system development efforts. Several of the 16 regional food groups in 83 of Iowa's 99 counties used that funding to establish a mini-grants program as a tool to leverage local dollars and partners. According to one, *We awarded close to \$3,000 in grants to 14 producers in the five-county region and that was used to leverage \$134,722.60 in funding for 14 different projects.* Some of the regional food groups found that establishing a competitive mini-grants program helps them leverage additional local funding, along with critical new local partners and allies. And while it is important to credit the ability to leverage as an *outcome* of the work, in and of itself, it is not an impact. Impacts are long-term outcomes, i.e., what happens as a result of increased leverage.

*[RFSWG and the Leopold Center are] giving [our] group and all the work we are doing instant credibility. As a follow up for that we just got a check from [a foundation] for \$20,000, which is coming to [partner agencies] to continue working on food system planning. Once people heard that [a foundation] supported us again it was like receiving the first Leopold money. We became more credible and worth returning phone calls.*

Showing statewide support for individual regional food systems is also valuable for leveraging local credibility. Local groups offer local partners evidence for statewide support by describing the statewide RFSWG network made possible through participation of other regional food groups across the state and Leopold Center support.

In addition to strong credibility, the extent to which collaboration is possible and the resulting ability to leverage new resources for work in building regional food systems depends on the presence of trust among participating organizations. The social capital literature, most notably Putnam (1995, 2000) recognizes the role of trust resources in reducing transaction costs and prompting collective action. Taking cues from the interviews, for the survey we measured trust in terms of attitudes participants hold about the group and the overall atmosphere of the RFSWG meetings (Table 2).

Table 2 shows that trust in RFSWG was relatively high in 2008, providing an environment in which participants felt safe and comfortable voicing their opinions. Moreover, there was a sense that participants would not misappropriate information learned or shared at the meetings for personal gain or to harm others. There also was a general sense that participants were not so concerned with protecting their "turf," which often happens among organizations competing for the same pots of money.

**Table 2. Trust**

<b>The questions below relate to trust within RFSWG. Rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements on a scale of 1 to 7 where 1=Strongly DISAGREE and 7=Strongly AGREE</b>	<b>Mean (n=36)</b>
I feel comfortable voicing my thoughts and opinions at RFSWG meetings/events.	<b>5.73</b>
RFSWG participants generally are not interested in protecting their "turf."	<b>5.46</b>
I am more likely to call someone I've met through RFSWG than if I have never met them before.	<b>5.46</b>
I trust that other RFSWG participants will not exploit or otherwise misappropriate ideas or information I share with the group.	<b>5.61</b>
RFSWG is a democratic organization. That is, anyone who wants to participate can. Furthermore, participants are able to influence the group's direction and activities	<b>5.32</b>

Source: Bregendahl, 2010

RFSWG respondents also emphasized that increased trust, relationships, and credibility enhanced their capacity to leverage key internal resources within their own organizations and agencies. One respondent implied she had more freedom to do work in sustainable food systems because *[RFSWG] lends me more credibility with [my employer], the college, because it gives me very clear connections to Iowa State University. In the eyes of my administrators, I look more credible because of those ISU connections and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture and that I'm a part of a group there.*

Credibility is critical for helping RFSWG participants gain the institutional or administrative support necessary for allowing them to take part in this work. One respondent representing a government agency said that RFSWG participation has helped her bolster her food system work despite sweeping administrative changes.

Helping agencies and institutions “look good” can play a role in securing institutional support for food systems work. This support is a precursor for allowing staff to spend time on such work. In 2008, we found that RFSWG participants reported spending an average of 12 percent more time on local food systems work than they did a year ago, a statistically significant difference ( $n=37$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Independently, in 2010 the newly-formed ISU Extension Regional and Local Food Systems task force conducted an assessment of the regional food system projects to which Extension staff were contributing. The task force noted, *We were surprised to learn that over 70 state and regional programming efforts involve Extension staff. Much of this work was connected (directly or indirectly) to RFSWG and other VCP working groups.*

*[RFSWG] has given me some credibility for what I'm doing with food, which allows me to do more. When our department looked at what I did, even with a gubernatorial shift and a directorial shift, they said, 'We want you to continue this. It's good for us. It makes us look good.'*

The CoP framework combined with the Leopold Center's role as a convener and funder encouraged RFSWG participants to cooperate with each other and extend collaboration at the local level, as described by Kania and Kramer (2011). For some, RFSWG participation has helped them take the first step in building trust locally, and helping them recognize other non-profits as assets/partners rather than competitors. Said one Resource Conservation and Development coordinator: *We are making a concerted effort on a more structural basis to recruit individuals from specific county Extension offices to [join] our group to develop our [regional food system] plan.*

## BUILDING ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

During our interviews with 20 RFSWG participants in 2007, many indicated the working group was helping them build the capacity of organizations, agencies, and institutions they represent. Capacity building for RFSWG participants meant helping their respective organization meet its mission more efficiently while improving the quality of work. The following elements were cited by RFSWG participants as helping to build organizational capacity:

- *Building content knowledge that helps participants address meta-level challenges such as leadership and policy development and community engagement;*
- *Informing/updating participants on regional food system activities in the state;*
- *Providing participants access to research-based results;*
- *Improving communication skills and food system “frames” to use in their region/community;*
- *Improving organizational efficiency by learning from the successes and mistakes of others and avoiding duplication of work;*
- *Encouraging new ways of thinking and doing; and*
- *Building on affiliation with the Leopold Center and local and regional food system efforts across the state to build credibility within participants' organizations and communities to make the case for food system change.*



These identified elements support the criteria of mutually reinforcing activities and continuous communication found in Kania and Kramer's (2011) “collective impact”.

In 2008, RFSWG participants reported that RFSWG built the capacity of their respective organizations by providing a collaborative work environment and opportunities leading to collaboration with other agencies and organizations. While leveraging financial resources continues to be a challenge overall for RFSWG participants, two regional food groups in the RFSWG have been able to leverage funding as a direct result of their connection to a statewide network. A grant administrator for the Wellmark Foundation in Iowa says participation in the RFSWG helped tip the scales in the favor of these two groups when Wellmark was considering applications for grant funding. In the early stages of the application review process, Wellmark consulted with the Leopold Center, which had already funded the work of the regional food groups that applied for Wellmark funding. These two regional food groups were awarded more than \$180,000 as a result. Said the Wellmark grants administrator, *Please share [with others] that we spoke during the Letter of Interest review to get information from your perspective. The networking capacity of RFSWG and the active participation in RFSWG of the two groups who requested funding from us played a role in our funding decision; it is a good teachable point of view to reinforce.* Having access to a broad spectrum of people and resources is a critical part of building the capacity of organizations to do food systems work, a point not lost on some key funders in Iowa.

## CHANGING ORGANIZATIONAL CUSTOMS, PRACTICES, AND POLICIES

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In 2007, evidence surfaced to support the claim that RFSWG was helping shift organizational policy. The Iowa Cattleman's Association (ICA) adopted a policy to support "further research, development and engagement by the beef industry as local food systems and local processing grow to larger markets for our future." This policy statement was introduced by an active participant of RFSWG, who is part of the first RFSWG-funded regional food systems network in northeast Iowa. RFSWG in 2007 also was increasing the visibility of regional and local food systems among elected officials, but it had not yet led to public policy changes. Seventy percent of respondents in the 2007 phone interviews said they interacted with government officials (defined as elected or paid representatives of publicly funded local, county, regional, state, and federal offices) as a result of RFSWG participation. Of those who did, the majority (64.3 percent) said they were interacting with county supervisors about local and regional food systems development. More than one in four (28.6 percent) had contacts with U.S. senators or their staff.

In 2008, nearly half of those responding to the RFSWG survey credited the group for playing a key role in helping change public policy. However, most of the changes cited were organizational policies or enforcement changes of existing public policies, rather than true public policy change.

## INFLUENCING PUBLIC POLICY THROUGH THE IOWA LOCAL FOOD AND FARM PLAN

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The first evidence of state public policy change came in 2010, when the Iowa legislature passed an amendment mandating that the Leopold Center develop a comprehensive Local Food and Farm Plan for the State of Iowa, including "policy and funding recommendations for supporting and expanding local food systems...".<sup>2</sup> The work of RFSWG and the regionally based groups had gained enough traction, attention, connections, credibility and resources that legislators interested in developing local food legislation regarded the Leopold Center as a key backbone organization to affect policy change.

<sup>2</sup> AMENDMENT - LOCAL FOOD AND FARM PLAN. *To the extent feasible, the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture established pursuant to section 266.39 shall prepare a local food and farm plan containing policy and funding recommendations for supporting and expanding local food systems and for assessing and overcoming obstacles necessary to increase locally grown food production. The Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture shall submit the plan to the general assembly by January 10, 2011. The plan shall include recommendations for short-term and long-term solutions, including but not limited to the enactment of legislation.*



## Myths and realities of public policy and food systems change

In 2007 one of the geographically based regional food system groups supported by RFSWG, the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm (NIFF) Coalition, was distributing an Institutional Food Survey. They were collecting information about activities and attitudes towards local food purchasing as part of their Kellogg-funded Food and Fitness Initiative (FFI). During distribution of the survey, personnel from area hospitals and nursing homes said they would like to purchase local foods but they believed that state policy prohibited those purchases. Several even reported that they had been written up by state health facility inspectors for making local food purchases and were told they needed to buy all their food from approved vendors only.

When the Northeast Iowa regional food group leaders in RFSWG heard about this, they contacted the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH) for an explanation and written policy covering approved vendors. From their contacts at IDPH, they learned that there was no language in the Iowa code that supported these enforcement claims and in fact, there is no state policy requiring inspection of fresh whole fruit and vegetable purchases. In a separate incident that occurred at the same time, a RFSWG participant from the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship's (IDALS) Bureau of Agricultural Diversification and Market Development was contacted by a farmer. This farmer had tried to sell produce to a health facility but was told by the institution that state policy prohibited this sort of purchase.

In Fall 2007, Northeast Iowa group members attending a RFSWG meeting shared their story. The IDALS representative who had been in contact with the farmer was in the audience, heard their concerns, and was prompted to connect with the Northeast Iowa group and later follow up by conducting an extensive search of the Iowa Code. When she could not find reference to such regulations, the IDALS

representative identified and communicated with the appropriate agency that would most likely address the issue: the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals' Division of Health Facilities. The Health Facilities Division is the certification agency responsible for inspecting, licensing, and certifying various health care entities, as well as health care providers and suppliers operating in Iowa. After months of delicate negotiations, in March 2008, the IDALS representative (and RFSWG participant) reported that the Department of Health Facilities had developed a document that clarified the state rules for purchasing local fruits and vegetables. IDALS asked if the Department of Health Facilities would make the document available to all nursing homes and inspectors to eliminate confusion. Ultimately the IDALS Bureau of Agricultural Diversification and Market Development sent the statement to 402 nursing homes and hospitals across the state.

There are at least four important lessons associated with this story:

- *Sometimes, what we perceive is a policy barrier is not a policy barrier at all, but rather a problem of regulation and enforcement.*
- *Perceptions about policies determine how people and institutions behave regardless of policy wording itself.*
- *Policy change in and of itself is a necessary but insufficient condition for changing structures to better support alternative local and regional food systems.*
- *Individuals, and by extension the groups they represent, are more likely to resolve perceived and real policy issues quickly and effectively within a nested network of well-informed and connected food practitioners, state agencies, and educational organizations whose work and energies converge.*

Source: Bregendahl, 2010



## Changing leadership and support for communities of practice

*In spring 2011, changes in leadership at the Leopold Center, the backbone organization for both VCP and RFSWG, led to significant alterations in funding and support mechanisms. Financial support for the VCP working groups, including RFSWG, was no longer supported as a separate area within the Leopold Center's Marketing and Food Systems Initiative work, in part because of the end of key external grants. Instead, future funding would depend on the award of funding through the Leopold Center's competitive grants program. New leadership at the Leopold Center, however, was committed to helping RFSWG and the other working groups of VCP transition to different leadership structures, either self-established or under a partner organization. In response to these altered circumstances, a steering committee was established for RFSWG comprised of the most tenured regional food groups and two representatives of newer groups. The Steering Committee developed a transition plan for self-leadership and was awarded financial support from the Leopold Center's competitive grants program to sustain its operations through 2013. In addition to covering convening costs, the funding also will support an integrated instrument with common indicators to collect food systems impact data. This is very much in sync with one key criteria outlined by Kania and Kramer (2011) for shared measurement systems, which are needed to keep participating groups aligned and learning from each other.*

Based on feedback from constituents involved with local RFSWG groups, these legislators determined that the Leopold Center would be the appropriate organization to lead development of a Local Food and Farm Plan. The Leopold Center could carry out the work in cooperation with its partners across the state—and perhaps more importantly, presumably because it had numerous partners with whom to cooperate across the state. Over a period of six months, the facilitator of RFSWG with support from Leopold Center staff, mobilized partners across the state to solicit input for consideration in the Plan. Leaders of RFSWG's regionally based food groups organized listening sessions, tapped into relationships and resources to solicit feedback from their geographic area, and channeled the findings back to the Leopold Center. Efforts to develop the Food and Farm Plan used the same (RFSWG-based) trust- and relationship-building approaches with state agencies and farm groups engaged in the plan starting with the first summit in June 2010 through January 2011, when the Plan was completed and delivered to the legislature (Pirog, R., C. Bregendahl, B. Larabee, J. Jensen, J. Obudzinski, J. Brown Joel, and J. Hermsen, 2011). The Iowa Food and Farm Plan Team engaged every organization and agency named in the Plan to generate accurate recommendations and increase support for the final recommendations.

Several of the recommendations not requiring funding (such as adding a local food farmer to the state food safety task force) were implemented within months of the release of the Plan. In July 2011, Senate File (SF) 509 was passed and signed by the governor. It established a local food and farm program coordinator position accompanied by \$75,000 in one-year appropriations. SF509 also created a six-member local food and farm program council, with two representatives from the Regional Food Systems Working group. The key legislative champion of the amendment, in discussions with a top administrator from ISU Extension and Outreach and the Iowa Secretary of Agriculture, talked about the intent of the legislation, specifically citing the Iowa Local Food and Farm Plan as the "heart" of Senate File 509 (Chase, 2011).

## MEASURING COMMITMENT TO ACHIEVE COLLECTIVE IMPACTS

The community of practice approach has led to changes in the culture of resource management and collaboration among some of the regional food groups within RFSWG. These tactics have assisted them in transitioning from the solitary role of grant recipient to taking on a blended role of recipient and funder as well as catalyst and convener.

One example is the use of the funding awarded by the Leopold Center to two regional food groups in the RFSWG. Those groups, who had achieved significant local success, voluntarily offered their grant money to two new neighboring regional food groups (with approval from the Leopold Center). Such actions demonstrate RFSWG partners' commitment to outcomes that benefit the collective, not just their individual groups and demonstrates collaborating networks described by Vandeventer and Mandell (2007).

When more experienced and financially secure groups voluntarily share their financial resources via more equitable arrangements to support groups with fewer financial resources, they demonstrate a commitment to building the field. By creating a "gift economy" (Vaughn, 2002), the action of these groups fosters mutually reinforcing activities leading to collective impact. A byproduct is an increase in the trust resources held by this group as well as the trust resources held by all of the groups. It also shows that these regional food groups, formerly in need of funding support, are taking on a new leadership role of regional backbone organizations as their financial fortunes change and they develop the capacity to become a food systems supporter, funder, and in some cases mentor.

Another key indicator of a commitment to a common agenda relates to the ability to publicly give credit to the partnership rather than take sole credit for success. The answer to the question of who gets (or takes) credit in a truly joint effort is an important one and determines the ability of groups to work and continue working together. It is a critical component of trust. In presentations, do partners publicly recognize the contributions of the network and other groups? Do publications about the network contain the network logo or only that of the organization providing funding for the publication? When appropriate, do network publications include a list of partners? Despite efforts to give appropriate credit, however, there will always be underlying tensions that must be negotiated when organizations come together to create social change. The power dynamics are difficult to navigate and to manage. Backbone organizations must be well versed in doing both.

If network partners can create a system of incentives that reward groups and individuals for being "good partners" who reallocate resources and give credit to the partnership rather than claiming it for themselves, such networks will achieve the deepest and most effective form of network collaboration (Vandeventer and Mandell, 2007) with the greatest probability of meaningful change and collective impact (Kania and Kramer, 2011). As one RFSWG participant put it, *The bottom-line goal at the end of the day is not to have my name smeared all over everything or get credit for things. My goal is to help as many people as I can, not necessarily through me or my great works but through anybody.*



## Conclusions

### IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER REGIONAL FOOD NETWORKS

Throughout this work, we have learned the following characteristics are essential for local and regional networks to collaborate successfully. It is important to note that our findings mirror the guiding principles of network effectiveness and longevity advanced by Vandeventer and Mandell (2007).

- 1. Local engagement and leadership at the grassroots level is essential for making decisions and making the work relevant, useful, effective and additive.** It is critical for leveraging key human and financial resources, and for building credibility of the work. Administrative support from local organizations makes grassroots involvement possible and increases chances of success.
- 2. Involvement by institutions such as government agencies, Extension, and state universities also is critical, but has a very different function than that of local decision makers.** The role of institutions in RFSWG has been to work towards collective rather than isolated impact. Institutions are necessary for leveraging statewide and even national resources and credibility for local efforts. Institutional representatives must be comfortable in this role, and be alert to not let this role morph into controlling resources and decision making. **Institutions must take cues from the grassroots organizers and leaders to provide resources that support local decision makers** and do the important work of telling others about the grassroots work in the state.
- 3. Collectively held values and power should be shared within and across organizations,** which becomes the basis for higher, more effective standards of network building. Evaluation can help this process. In RFSWG, we learned that high levels of trust were generated when “No one is power grabbing. No one is saying that they are more important, that their point of view wins, that their point of view trumps. I think the very focus on relationships is in fact one of the strongest attributes [of the RFSWG].” In addition, throughout the phone interviews, the group expressed a collectively held appreciation for realistic assessment of chances for success. *[RFSWG] is willing to confront some of the issues of the economics of agriculture head-on that many people around the country really want to avoid... Having that milieu is a much better learning environment for me and for [my organization] than people who are trying to avoid reality but are moving ahead anyway.*



4. Another key element in the success of RFSWG is a **high tolerance and respect for process**. Process work moves more slowly and differs from project work in that participants are not wedded to self-serving outcomes, but instead are committed to democratic approaches to group decision-making. Getting everyone up to speed and on board, negotiating a common language, adding new partners, recognizing the value and contribution of each partner, and building trust and relationships takes time. Yet once the heavy lifting of relationship building is done, project work becomes easier and more efficient. Said one RFSWG participant: *I work better with people I know.*
5. Another element contributing to RFSWG success was the support the Leopold Center provided the group as the key backbone organization. Convening responsibilities, fiscal management, and program development all were coordinated by staff at the Leopold Center. However, in the case of RFSWG, **the key backbone organization also was a funder** willing to commit financial and human resources to process work and relationship building while at the same time requiring groups to learn together as a condition for funding (all 16 groups received funding from the Leopold Center). As Kania and Kramer (2011:41) advise, funders who want to create large-scale change should “take responsibility for assembling the elements of a solution; create a movement for change; include solutions from outside the nonprofit sector; and use actionable knowledge to influence behavior and improve performance.” In addition to the backbone organization serving as funder, the Leopold Center also **relinquished most of the decision making control of funding new groups by asking existing groups to accept that responsibility, thereby increasing buy-in**. In this way, the Leopold Center acted as a servant leader,<sup>3</sup> which created specific conditions for funding and allowed the funding allocation decision to be made primarily by the existing grassroots leaders who would become new peers of the funded groups.
6. Stepping back from the 16 regional food groups even further, **one of the key factors in RFSWG’s success is that it was part of a larger network**—the Value Chain Partnerships network, although this was not always evident to RFSWG participants. In effect the regional food groups were part of a “nested network” that included RFSWG, the other VCP working groups, and the coordinators of those working groups. Over time with repeated communication and deeper involvement, more and more RFSWG partners began to understand and value this nested network approach and see RFSWG’s connection to a broader range of activities supporting regional food system development in Iowa. In addition, the RFSWG coordinator, by interacting regularly with coordinators of the other working groups, could engage in problem solving when faced with challenges and learn from the strategies other facilitators were using to manage working groups effectively.
7. Finally, we cannot overlook the role RFSWG has played in **providing willing partners an opportunity to shape the dialogue and outcomes** associated with regional food system development in the state. *What is exciting for me about RFSWG isn’t so much the impact it has on me (which is good) but the fact that I’m able to create an impact by being part of the working group. I’m actually helping to create the impact that I get back from RFSWG.*

Backbone support organizations are those with dedicated staff who can handle logistical and administrative details needed to help coordinate local food system efforts so they function smoothly and build on previous work. The Leopold Center, over a period of eight years, developed its capacity to function as a backbone support organization to create a space for RFSWG to grow and flourish. The 16 local food groups in RFSWG and the Leopold Center developed a common agenda, continue to explore shared measurement systems focusing on local food sales and purchases, and developed, through continuous communication, reinforcing activities that created synergy for food systems change.

<sup>3</sup> The term “servant leadership” was coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in *The Servant as Leader*, an essay published in 1970. The premise is built on the notion that the servant leader is compelled to serve first and lead second.

## CHALLENGES IN REPLICATING THE MODEL

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If community work teaches us anything, it is that one size does not fit all. This work is no exception. The community of practice model does not necessarily fit all situations nor does it necessarily fit all places. Different places have different sets of conditions, resources, strengths, challenges, and different configurations of each. This case study is not a prescription every place with an eye on developing regional food systems can or should fill. What follows are reasons why.

### Conquering the Time and Resource Treadmill

Despite the benefits and collective impacts we can trace to the work of the RFSWG, the challenges of doing this kind of work are formidable. Communities of practice are extremely time intensive in terms of the continuous learning required of facilitators and/or backbone organizations, participants notwithstanding (Kerno, 2008). Indeed, facilitators and partners alike have the daunting task of being socially attuned and skilled at making strategic interventions to help build collaborative relationships. This is the crux of civic and professional engagement, which requires intensive coordination. A few of the many tactics facilitators need to employ include (adapted from Zdorkowski, 2011):

- *Providing leadership on convening appropriate and interested stakeholders to select timely, relevant, and worthwhile topics that pique and maintain interest;*
- *Helping the group develop a purpose and mission that distinguishes it from the work of any one partnering organization, but at the same time offers stakeholders a vision and culture they can support;*
- *Working to build trust and collaboration among stakeholders in varied ways, both formal and informal;*
- *Effectively encouraging the group to push and cross organizational boundaries;*
- *Ensuring stakeholders develop and maintain a sense of ownership in the work of the group and also helping stakeholders build their own capacity to develop ownership among their partners and supporters;*
- *Making sure participants are vested enough to take on responsibilities to share the workload;*
- *Managing conflict in ways productive to the goals of the group; and*
- *Identifying interest and momentum around issues and adapting agendas accordingly when circumstances shift.*



We have learned from our partners in Northeast Iowa (Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative) that in order to persuade people to come together and commit to working on an issue, it is necessary to constantly frame the work and the results in terms of a cost-benefit analysis. Northeast Iowa has met success using continuous messaging tactics that demonstrate that **the benefit of change outweighs the benefit of not changing**. Furthermore, their message points out that **the cost of not changing is greater than the cost of changing**. However, individuals and their organizations must be allowed to process this information before they can commit to working collectively. “Change is difficult and comes at some cost, even when it is viewed as a potentially positive change” (Ranum, 2011). The community of practice literature acknowledges the difficulty in determining and conveying whether the costs for developing and maintaining effective communities of practice are justified by the benefits (Millen, Fontaine, and Muller, 2002).

The health of the broader economy brings other complications. When publicly supported government and university workforces are downsized, non profit organizations are coping with burgeoning complexity and competition for a narrower range of resources, and businesses limit their activities to the bare essentials, collaborative learning and problem solving efforts are increasingly constrained. “Consequently, the time available to attend to value-enhancing activities of the firm [or organization], of which a community of practice may be centered around, is reduced” (Kerno, 2008:74). Securing new resources in the form of grants adds another layer of complexity and responsibility to a never-ending cycle of administrative reporting on top of convening, facilitating, managing, and trust- and relationship-building roles. There is no easy fix to this, except to cite a strategy that works to some extent in RFSWG and among some of the more advanced regional food groups: mission and partner alignment. Such alignment is critical for redistributing responsibilities of community of practice maintenance to partners and ensuring that single activities meet multiple goals.

### **Need for funders to support communities of practice and networks**

Work that relies on complex, well-functioning networks requires considerable resources simply to keep communication clear and trust levels adequate. Developing and maintaining trust among nonprofits, corporations, and government agencies is a continuous struggle. Participants need several years of regular meetings to build up enough experience with each other to recognize and appreciate the common motivation behind their different efforts (Kania and Kramer, 2011). A common agenda, mission alignment, frequency of quality interaction, clear lines of communication, and transparent processes are all important elements of developing trusting relationships among groups. Yet few funders are willing to fund such work because these outcomes typically cannot be achieved in short-term funding cycles.

Funders often provide resources to organizations to carry out projects, not to function as backbone organizations. As such, “the expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails” (Kania and Kramer, 2011:40). Funders must be committed to supporting process work that builds relationships over time without guarantees of future success. According to Kramer (2007), there is an emerging trend among major U.S. foundations to provide grantees with general operating support for capacity building of this sort rather than funding short-term grants for a limited set of uncoordinated and often unrelated activities. Convincing funders to take such an approach may not be easy, especially since funders want to know what impact their funding has on an effort. However, systemic change efforts, by definition, do not rely on resources or support from any one source; if they do, they will fail at worst or at best, be of little consequence. Concerns about establishing a proven link between funding and impact arise among funders who adhere to a traditional view that the exclusive purpose of evaluation is to determine the impact of the foundation’s funding rather than also to inform decision making (Kramer, 2007:31). “In most cases, a well-informed observer...is able to determine...whether there is a credible link between the [funded work] and the changes taking place. Establishing that [funded work] made a contribution is far easier than establishing attribution” (Kramer, 2007:31).



## Building trust and collaboration in the local foods movement

The fact that the regional food groups within RFSWG were willing to sacrifice financial resources to strengthen the position of the entire network demonstrated a significant level of trust in both the partners and the process at the time we conducted the evaluation. That situation has changed along with changes in leadership within the backbone organization. The leadership change has hailed a concomitant change in funding conditions, partner configurations, communication, and reinforcing activities. Nevertheless what we have observed in VCP and RFSWG over the years has been commonly noted in the literature on social capital (Gibb, 1978; Bordieu, 1986; Coleman, 1998, 1990; Fukuyama, 2001, 1995; Portes, 1998; Portes and Landolt, 1996; Putnam, 2000, 1995): As trust increases, risk and transaction costs decrease, prompting new partnerships to develop which bring the greatest rewards and dividends to partners. When trust declines, risk and transaction costs increase and collaboration wanes. If trust among organizational, institutional, and grassroots partners can be sustained long-term, deeper collaboration will emerge with the greatest chance for collective impact. Otherwise, the collaboration merely struggles to exist.

Collaborative work in local and regional food systems eventually must come to terms with the notion of “social and human profitability” as a necessary precondition for long-term business and organization profitability. This goal is best achieved when there is trust that others in the field are acting in the best interest of the entire group, and when each participating organization is willing to credit collaborative efforts for their success, rather than claiming it as their own. Only then will we begin to make progress on the need to elicit elusive but essential collective impacts that catalyze change across our food system. We close with the words of author Frances Moore Lappé (2011) who best summarizes our thesis: “Agriculture can serve life only if it is regarded as a culture of healthy relationships, both in the field—among soil organisms, insects, animals, plants, water, sun—and in the human communities it supports.” Our community of practice partners in Iowa, to which this work is credited, have taught us this much.





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## Appendix

### REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS WORKING GROUP (2011)

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#### Where is our work?

**Flavors of Northwest Iowa:** Working in Cherokee, Ida, Monona, Plymouth, Sioux and Woodbury counties

**Iowa Great Lakes Local Foods Network:** Working in Clay, Dickinson, Emmet, O'Brien, Osceola and Palo Alto counties

**Northeast Iowa Food & Farm Coalition:** Working in Allamakee, Chickasaw, Clayton, Fayette, Howard and Winneshiek counties

**Northern Iowa Food & Farm Partnership:** Working in Benton, Black Hawk, Bremer, Buchanan, Butler, Grundy and Tama counties

**Harvest from the Heart:** Working in Marshall county

**Southwest Iowa Food & Farm Initiative:** Working in Audubon, Cass, Fremont, Guthrie, Harrison, Mills, Montgomery, Page, Pottawattamie and Shelby counties

**Southwest Iowa Regional Food Systems:** Working in Adair, Adams, Clarke, Decatur, Guthrie, Ringgold, Taylor and Union counties

**South-Central Iowa Area Partnership:** Working in Appanoose, Clarke, Decatur, Lucas, Madison, Monroe, Union Warren and Wayne counties

**Hometown Harvest of Southeast Iowa:** Working in Davis, Jefferson, Keokuk, Mahaska, Van Buren and Wapello counties

**Dubuque Eats Well:** Working in Delaware, Dubuque, Jackson and Jones counties

**Iowa Corridor Food and Agriculture Coalition:** Working in Benton, Cedar, Iowa, Johnson, Jones, Linn, Poweshiek, Tama and Washington counties

**North Central Iowa Local Food Partnership:** Working in Cerro Gordo, Floyd, Franklin, Hancock, Kossuth, Mitchell, Winnebago, Worth and Wright counties

**Healthy Urban Food and Farming Group:** Working in Polk county

**Great River Food Alliance of Southeast Iowa, Inc.:** Working in Des Moines, Henry, Lee and Louisa counties

**Quad City Food Hub:** Working in Clinton, Muscatine, and Scott counties

**Green County Local Foods Working Group:** Working in Green and Guthrie counties

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