

**PRODUCE SECTIONS, TOWN SQUARES, AND FARM STANDS:
COMPARING LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS IN COMMUNITY CONTEXT***

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ABSTRACT

A growing literature has grappled with the emergence of local food systems as an alternative to the conventional agricultural model and assumes that the development of local food system venues, such as farmers' markets, are positive community-building initiatives. Too often left out of this discourse are empirical assessments of the community characteristics that lend themselves to the success of farmers' markets or similar initiatives. Further, when farmers' markets are not significantly patronized by community members, does this necessarily mean that people do not value local produce? This article uses the results from surveys of farmers' market consumers and case studies of local foods initiatives in parts of Illinois to answer these questions and applies the community capitals framework and convention theory to help categorize communities according to their acceptance of farmers' markets. Our findings demonstrate that consumers value locally-grown food despite location, but seek it out through different channels. The implications are that building successful local food systems is not simply about changing consumer opinion or applying a one-size-fits-all approach to local markets, but will require creativity in developing local markets that build on the current shopping behaviors of consumers.

*This material is based upon work supported by the Cooperative State Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under Project NO. ILLU-793-378; University of Illinois Dudley Smith Initiative (628090-793000-191100); and NCR-SARE Graduate Student program (GNC05-046). Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture or other awarding agencies.

Introduction

A growing literature has grappled with the emergence of local food systems as an alternative to the conventional agricultural model. Our current food system produces food for long storage and transportation times using vertically-integrated processes of production and distribution, increasingly large corporate farms, and heavy use of pesticides and other chemicals, without consumer knowledge of production methods or food origins. In contrast, local food systems—the production, processing, and consumption of food within a specified geographic area—are characterized by shorter transportation distances, knowledge of producers and production methods, viable small family farms, and food policies that promote access to affordable, healthy food choices (Allen et al. 2003; Berry 1996; Campbell 1997; Imhoff 1996; Kloppenburg, Hendrickson, and Stevenson 1996; Kloppenburg et al. 2000).

The negative community impacts associated with industrial agriculture have been well documented by researchers in the social sciences (Durrenberger and Thu 1996; Stofferahn 2006). Building from the analysis of industrial farming, a common discourse among alternative agriculture researchers suggests that the development of local food systems can be a positive community-building initiative. Goldschmidt's (1978) classic work on the relationship between community outcomes and structure of agriculture found that a community with more small-scale operations, more local independent owners and local operators had a higher level of community well-being than a community with more large-scale corporate farming operations. Tolbert et al. (2002) argue that "civic community"—a community with a stable economy, high incomes, low unemployment, and civically-engaged community members—is created in part through a diverse economy with many locally-owned businesses, including small family farms.

Participants in a Wisconsin workshop suggested relationship-building as a key characteristic of alternative food systems (Kloppenburg et al. 2000). Likewise, a growing body of work on farmers' markets and community supported agriculture has asserted that these alternative food systems are remarkable not only because they provide alternative nutritional possibilities, but also because they rebuild communities around food production. Cone and Myhre (2000), for instance, argued that community supported agriculture (CSA) operations re-embed agriculture in the local context. Hinrichs (2000) argued that CSAs were adopted specifically to decommodify relationships in large part to reignite local economies through connecting consumers to producers of food. Lyson (2004) called this movement

“civic agriculture”: a new agriculture that strives to improve society rather than just accrue financial capital in exchange for commodity production.

Too often left out of this discourse are comparative assessments of the community characteristics that lend themselves to success of local food system initiatives, specifically farmers’ markets. Several questions relate to this concern. Under what conditions are farmers’ markets more successful? Are there urban and rural differences in the success of farmers’ markets in Illinois? If there are, what differentiates rural areas in terms of the success of farmers’ markets? In this paper we look at the impact of location (whether farmers’ markets are in a town or rural area), placement within the community (town center, edge of town, etc.), the kinds and amount of community capital, and the level of civic engagement in discussing the success of farmers’ markets. In those places where farmers’ markets have not been successful, we discuss whether anemic farmers’ markets constitute lack of interest in local foods or imply that there may be better ways of delivering local foods to some rural consumers.

This article uses case studies of central Illinois local foods initiatives including surveys of farmers’ market consumers to answer these questions. We use a combination of the community capitals framework and convention theory to help frame our analysis, to understand better the acceptance, or lack thereof, of farmers’ markets in particular communities.

The Illinois Context

The interest in and development of local food systems in Illinois has expanded in recent years. Although some urban communities in the state have held farmers’ markets for decades, Illinois has traditionally given its support to conventional commodity agricultural production, as evidenced by the commodity agriculture focus of the Illinois Farm Bureau.¹ However, farmers are clearly looking for new opportunities to diversify their farming operations. Thirty-six percent of direct-market farmers surveyed in central Illinois said they raise commodity products besides their direct-market products.² This indicates that those involved in direct-

¹A glance at the Illinois Farm Bureau finds little, if any, attention to farmers’ markets, local foods, or alternatives to the conventional agriculture system. <http://www.ilfb.org/>, retrieved February 27, 2007.

²Results of a mail and telephone survey of Central Illinois farmers conducted by Cooperband and Hultine (2006), Laboratory for Community and Economic Development (LCED). University of Illinois Extension. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

market production are not just “hobby farmers” on acreages. This percentage would indicate that more than one third of the direct-market producers aim to make a living from farming and are trying to do that through engaging in multiple types of production. The demand for locally-grown products is increasing throughout the state, in part fueled by new purchasing policies by large institutions. The City of Chicago, for instance, cosponsors a “farm forager” position responsible for building connections between local food producers and farmers’ markets, restaurants, and other suitable institutions in Chicago.³

Beginning in 2004, the Laboratory for Community and Economic Development at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign initiated a broad research project designed to evaluate the current state of local food systems in Illinois and to document the potential for local food systems to serve as a strategy for community and economic development for rural communities. The project involved surveys of direct-market producers, institutional and commercial food buyers, household consumers, and case studies of local food system markets, including farmers’ markets and an alternative local food venue. This paper discusses the results of information collected from consumers and the local food system markets.

Economic Sociology, Conventions, and Alternative Market Development

This paper builds on the work of Flora et al. (2005), Flora and Flora (2005), and Emery and Flora (2006) in using the community capitals framework (CCF) to conceptualize discussion of local food systems in Illinois. CCF posits that there are multiple assets at the community level that may be built upon in the development process.

Neo-liberal economists argue that market transformations are the result of natural flows of supply and demand, and that community leaders should focus on the comparative advantage of low-cost labor and proximity to inputs (natural amenities) (Biggart and Beamish 2003). Thevenot (1997) and others (Biggart and Beamish 2003) argue rather that the norms, and therefore the options for economic development are contingent on socially constructed conventions—intentionally developed rules, standards and habitual actions and interactions. These conventions create not only the legal and regulatory parameters of development, but also the

³The Chicago Green City Farmers’ Market is a non-profit organization that promotes sustainable farming and consumption of locally produced food. CGCM manages a weekly farmers’ market in Evanston, IL., and co-sponsors the farm forager position with the City of Chicago Mayor’s Office of Special Events. http://www.chicagoreencitymarket.org/about_plans.asp, retrieved February 27, 2007.

non-spoken parameters for discussion about economic options at the local level (Biggart and Beamish 2003; Thevenot 1997; Wilkinson 1997).

These parameters may be characterized as forms of coordination across actors within a market context. People implement these frameworks using different frames of coordination. Botanski and Thevenot (1991) proposed six different forms of coordination (conventions) between actors in an economic relationship (Lassaut and Sylvander 1997):

- “Domestic” or “Interpersonal” convention: Interpersonal links: actors know and trust each other about the product qualities;
- Opinion convention: reputation: actors take into account the reputation of the best-known firms;
- Industrial convention: standards: actors assess quality by referencing technically defined and implemented standards;
- Inspiration convention: innovation: actors refer to innovation rate to judge quality;
- Civic convention: society: actors assess quality concerning the links with civic interests;
- Market convention: market: actors can judge by themselves the product and refer to price.

There have been other efforts to connect convention theory to agriculture. Busch (2000) and Murdoch and Miele (1999) both argued that convention theory provided a useful framework for understanding the drive toward labeling in commodity agriculture. Agricultural producers, they argue, want to convey an underlying values orientation in their production system. Through the 1980s, commodity systems relied on an industrial convention that valued innovative production and processing technology through labels such as USDA Grade A beef. The industrial orientation allowed for commodity suppliers to then compete based on price—as consumers would presumably accept the commodity standards as assurance of quality. Producers and commodity associations adhering to this convention, however, were less pleased about the labeling that specified production techniques or inputs—hence the GMO-labeling debate (Busch 2000).

On the other hand, competing producers have sought market niches with labels such as organic, low-input, and family grown, seeking to use opinion, civic, or inspiration convention in production orientation. Flora (2005) uses convention theory to discuss the differing mindsets that drive agricultural production in the

conventional Iowa corn-bean farm, as opposed to the Hopi agricultural system. The Iowa corn-bean farm operates on a market convention, producing a high-volume, low-value commodity valued based on price. The Hopi agricultural system works under a civic convention, deciding how much and when to plant particular crops based on a variety of social and cultural concerns.

Raynolds (2002) used convention theory to frame the differences between conventional coffee production and fair-trade coffee. Conventional coffee operates on a combination of pure market convention—cheaper cost per unit, such as with Coca-Cola-owned Folgers. This involves developing coffee plantations that allow for more efficient mass production for sale on the commodity market. More recently, other coffee companies, such as Starbucks, have tried to exploit an industrial and opinion convention, serving more robust coffee, purchased largely because of improved brewing technologies (and invented coffee drinks!), reputation, and nationalized brand loyalty. The fair-trade coffee movement, on the other hand, has used a civic convention—people are willing to pay a consistently higher price per unit of coffee because the brand ensures that coffee producers are paid a living wage.

Barham (2003) is especially important for this paper as she argues that convention theory might be useful in framing consumer commitment to particular types of purchasing. In other words, the flip side of labeling fair-trade coffee to capture the civic minded market is that consumers choose to shop based on a civic convention—and are willing to pay a higher price to purchase food they believe is produced using socially acceptable production methods. Smith, Sharp, and Miller (2006) categorized Ohio consumers who purchased locally-grown food as “motivated consumers” and found that they held several differing opinions about food purchasing when compared with a random sample of consumers in that same region. The researchers found that motivated consumers operated on a civic convention, valuing organic or locally-grown food and humane animal treatment in their purchasing decisions, whereas central Ohio consumers, whose decisions were influenced by price, continued to operate on a market convention. We argue here that we could use the same methodology to understand the shifts inherent in the option to buy through the local food system in Illinois, rather than through the conventional commodity and grocery system.

Convention theory explains what, but we need to orient our work as to how, as well. It is here that the community capitals framework will be helpful. Flora et al. (2005) described six elements in the community capitals framework (CCF). While traditional community development provides human capital (training/education),

financial capital (money), or built capital (infrastructure), the community capitals framework argues that development initiatives must also recognize and try to build social capitals (networks and relationships), cultural capital (cultural awareness), and political capital (connections to political resources). There are two forms of social capital, bridging and bonding. Bonding social capital is the relationships of trust and reciprocity among people in the same social group. Bridging social capital is the development of networks of trust and reciprocity across social groups and can refer both to embracing improved social diversity and to connections to people and institutions outside a given community—in the case of our paper, possibly creating networks among grocers and farmers, for instance (Flora et al. 2005; Flora and Flora 2005).

Bregendahl and Flora (2006) used the community capitals framework to understand community supported agriculture (CSA) in Iowa. Their analysis indicated that while the organizers of CSA in Iowa worked hard to develop social capital with and among their consumers, consumers were mostly interested in directly improving natural capital and human capital (through purchasing food that was healthy and better for the environment). This is not to say that social capital was not important, as the support of local farmers was an important aspect of the decision to subscribe to the CSA. Our research will argue that social capital is critical in the development of successful rural local food systems.

Research Methods

This research documented the opinions of food consumers in Central Illinois. Consumers were surveyed at six central Illinois farmers' markets and at an independently owned grocery store selling locally-grown food. Survey methods for both groups of consumers are described below.

Farmers' Market Consumers

Six Central Illinois communities were selected for an in-depth study of their farmers' market. The communities were chosen based on population size; two were rural towns with populations less than 5,000, two were medium-sized communities with populations between 10,000 – 15,000 residents, and the final two were larger metropolitan communities. The two largest communities are "twin" cities with two communities connected by a university. These two communities have populations greater than 100,000. The age of the farmers' market was also a factor in selecting the communities. Three of the markets had been in existence for ten years or

TABLE 1. CENTRAL ILLINOIS FARMERS MARKET DETAILS

| | METAMORA | SULLIVAN | TAYLORVILLE | EFFINGHAM | URBANA/ CHAMPAIGN | BLOOMINGTON /NORMAL |
|---|--------------------|--|--------------------|---|----------------------|------------------------|
| Year market started.. | 2002 | 2004 | 2003 | 1995 | 1978 | 1998 |
| Average number of food vendors..... | 6 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 55 | 40 |
| Estimated weekly customers (peak season)..... | 300 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 3,000 | 3,000 |
| Location of market. ... | Downtown square | Off downtown, stoplight intersection on state route | Downtown square | Southern edge of town, on highway | Downtown | Downtown square |
| Market manager. | Volunteer | Chamber of Commerce | Volunteer | Volunteer | City of Urbana | Volunteer |
| Market day/hours. | Saturday 8-11AM | Friday 3-6 PM | Saturday 9-1PM | Friday/ Saturday 9-1PM | Saturday 7-12PM | Saturday 6:45-11AM |
| Average \$ spent at market on survey day. | \$10.00 | \$7.00 | \$2.00 | \$6.50 | \$20.00 | \$12.00 |

longer, while the other three were less than five years old. The farmers' market case study communities included Metamora, Sullivan, Taylorville, Effingham, Urbana, and Bloomington. (See, Table 1.)

Between August and September 2005, an intercept survey of consumers was conducted at each of the six farmers' markets. Due to low response numbers, the intercept survey was conducted again in June 2006 at the Sullivan, Taylorville, and Effingham markets. Total completed surveys from farmers' markets were 452. Consumers were asked to fill out a short survey asking about their reasons for attending the farmers' market, suggestions for improvement, and their food shopping behaviors. Table 2 shows the breakdown of the number of consumers surveyed at each of these farmers' markets.

TABLE 2. ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CENTRAL ILLINOIS FARMERS' MARKETS

| COMMUNITY | CUSTOMERS SURVEYED | URBAN/RURAL CLASSIFICATION |
|-------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|
| Bloomington. | 133 | Urban |
| Effingham. | 25 | Rural |
| Metamora. | 45 | Rural |
| Sullivan. | 24 | Rural |
| Taylorville..... | 29 | Rural |
| Urbana. | 196 | Urban |
| Total..... | 452 | 2 Urban: 5 Rural |

Alternative Local Food Market Consumers

The Fairbury community was selected as a case study because of a unique partnership developed in 2004 between local Fairbury farmers and the community's small, independently-owned grocery store, Dave's Supermarket. The farmers and store owners created an "indoor farmers' market" inside the store. Consumers in Dave's Supermarket in Fairbury were also surveyed using the intercept technique, near the produce section inside the store. These surveys were conducted on September 21 and October 1, 2005, at four one-hour intervals between 10:00 AM - 6:00 PM, which were considered peak shopping hours in the store, according to the store owners. Seventy-one surveys were completed. Survey questions included consumers' shopping behaviors, awareness of the locally-grown food products available, and their attitudes about their community.

Additional Methodology

Participant observation techniques were also used to document interactions and observations at each farmers' market and the Fairbury grocery store between 2004 and 2006. The Fairbury producer group holds monthly planning meetings to discuss products, marketing strategies, and new producer recruitment. One researcher attended these meetings to document the interactions and discussions of the producers involved in the Fairbury project. Interviews were also conducted with key stakeholders in the Fairbury local food project, including producers, business owners, and local government officials. A focus group meeting was held in February 2006 for farmers' market vendors and market managers, in which participants were asked about defining a successful farmers' market, and specific needs and challenges for their local farmers' markets.

Characterizing the Central Illinois Farmers' Markets

Our research intentionally surveyed local food venues in rural and urban locations in central Illinois. Farmers' markets represent the most commonly recognized form of local food distribution and marketing. According to Illinois Farm Direct, there are 203 farmers' markets in Illinois.⁴ Most of these are, not surprisingly, in and around Chicago in urban and suburban locations. However, there are farmers' markets "down state" as well. In our sample of farmers' markets in central Illinois, we intentionally included markets in both rural and urban areas. Tables 1 and 3 give a comparison of demographics of the farmers' market communities and the characteristics of the organization of each market.

The Rural Markets. Sullivan, Illinois, is a rural community of 4,300 residents. The Sullivan Farmers' Market was started in 2004 by the Sullivan Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development. Several community members approached the chamber with the idea of starting a market and helped develop the market during its first year. The market was originally held in the downtown square. In 2006, the market moved from downtown to a vacant lot on a busy intersection in the north part of town. The new location was an attempt to draw more customers, although there was little difference in customer traffic on the days the market was observed. Other businesses nearby include a restaurant and craft store, gas station, and McDonald's restaurant. The market has struggled since its inception and has experienced limited success in attracting new vendors and customers. The market manager, an employee of the Chamber of Commerce who is compensated for her

⁴Illinois Farm Direct, www.illinoisfarmdirect.org, Retrieved February 27, 2007.

TABLE 3. DEMOGRAPHICS OF CENTRAL ILLINOIS CASE STUDY COMMUNITIES.

| | METAMORA | SULLIVAN | TAYLORVILLE | EFFINGHAM | URBANA/ CHAMPAIGN | BLOOMINGTON /NORMAL | FAIRBURY | ILLINOIS |
|---|----------|----------|-------------|-----------|----------------------|------------------------|----------|------------|
| Population (2000). | 2,700 | 4,326 | 11,427 | 12,384 | 103,913 | 110,194 | 3,968 | 12,419,293 |
| Percent with high school degree or higher..... | 87.1 | 78.4 | 82.1 | 81.6 | 91.2 | 91.9 | 78.2 | 81.4 |
| Median age..... | 43.1 | 40.3 | 39.3 | 37.5 | 24.9 | 27.7 | 38.9 | 34.7 |
| Average household size... | 2.44 | 2.28 | 2.28 | 2.25 | 2.19 | 2.39 | 2.48 | 2.63 |
| Mean travel time to work (min)..... | 21.5 | 20.6 | 21.7 | 14.3 | 14.6 | 15.1 | 22.1 | 28.0 |
| Percent below poverty line..... | 2.9 | 8.8 | 10.1 | 9.6 | 24.7 | 13.6 | 4.9 | 10.7 |
| Per capita income (1999 dollars). | \$20,200 | \$17,693 | \$18,162 | \$19,132 | \$17,317 | \$21,263 | \$19,145 | \$23,104 |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census

time managing the market, is trying to find a new volunteer manager to run the market in 2007. Although the manager is an energetic and professional staff member of the Chamber of Commerce, she has had little support from her chamber board, which has limited her ability to move the project forward.

Metamora (population 2,700) is approximately 17 miles from Peoria, an urban center with a population of more than 100,000. In 2002, a native of the community who had returned after college wanted to create a farmers' market in downtown Metamora that would bring activity back to the square and draw customers to downtown businesses. He worked with several local farmers to sell the idea to the town council, making a presentation at a council meeting and gaining the support of the council. The market is on a blocked-off street on the town center, next to a small park, and across the street from the historic courthouse museum. The market manager arranged with the museum manager for the museum to be open during the farmers' market hours. Customers shopped at the market before stopping for their morning coffee at the locally-owned restaurant on the square. In 2004, the market manager was elected village president. For such a new and small-scale farmers' market, it has attracted weekly crowds of approximately 300 customers, and the local restaurant near the market has hired an extra server to serve the increase in customers on farmers' market days. The Metamora Farmers' Market manager has been a strong leader for the group of farmers and has worked collaboratively with the farmers, local businesses, and elected officials to build support for the market.

In 2003, the Taylorville Main Street organization, Christian County Farm Bureau, and the Christian County Ag Group started the Taylorville Farmers' Market, which is on the courthouse square in downtown Taylorville. Only one vendor has a tent; the others sell from tables or the back of their trucks. The market accepts farmers from Illinois, Missouri, Indiana, or Kentucky. At least once a month, the Taylorville Main Street organization holds a special event with the farmers' market, such as an art show and health fair. Several local businesses are open during market hours. There are no signs used to distinguish the market, and consumer traffic at the market is not significant. However, the market manager hopes that more farmers and customers will participate in coming years.

The Effingham Farmers' Market has been in existence since 1995. Initially in the business parking lot near downtown, it moved to a mall parking lot in 2003. The mall is on the south side of town off a state highway. It currently has many empty stores and is attached to a vacant grocery store. The farmers' market is allowed to use the parking lot without cost unless a grocery store reopens, in which case the market must find a new location. There are on average five vendors: two

of the vendors have a farm, and the others are market gardeners. Most of the vendors have a tent and display their products on tables. The only advertising for the market is a sign on the edge of the road. Most of the vendors who sell at the farmers' market are more than sixty years old, and the manager is an eighty-year-old retired farmer. Although the market draws approximately one hundred customers weekly, a key aspect of the market is the opportunity for the vendors to socialize with their customers. The manager is concerned that they have not recruited any younger farmers to participate in the market and worries that the market will not last after the current vendors retire.

The Urban Markets. The Urbana Market at the Square originated in 1978, and is in the parking lot of the Lincoln Square Mall in downtown Urbana. The City of Urbana organizes the market and provides a paid staff member to manage the needs of the market. There is a mix of food and art vendors, and several nonprofit organizations also maintain booths at the market. Often, several musicians also are performing during market hours. The farmers' market is a large-scale event for the downtown and draws approximately 3,000 customers in peak season.

The Uniquely Downtown Bloomington Association (UDBA) started the Bloomington Farmers' Market in 1998, which is now held in the downtown center of the city. The market now holds approximately forty food vendors and many arts and crafts vendors, and covers three sides of the courthouse square. Several nonprofit organizations also have booths at the market. The market manager is a very committed volunteer, and UDBA provides a student intern to assist the manager. A nearby coffee shop sells coffee at the market, and many unique stores are also open during market hours. Both the Bloomington and Urbana markets are stable and well-supported by their respective local governments and downtown organizations.

Results and Discussion

Rural/Urban Contrasts

Our observations of the farmers' markets and survey responses from consumers at the markets gave initial indications of differences between urban and rural consumers. Except for the Metamora farmers' market, the other rural markets faced significant challenges in recruiting producers, attracting customers, and finding the necessary support for market managers. The age of the market was not a significant factor in the success of these rural markets—the Effingham market started in 1995 but was still attempting to recruit larger numbers of producers, while the Metamora market, established in 2002, seemed to thrive from its inception. One

common explanation for the difference in success rates between rural and urban farmers' markets is differing income levels. Table 2 demonstrates that per capita income, commute time, and percent of individuals below the poverty line in the communities are not significantly different, thus the farmers' markets have a common denominator in community demographics that should not influence the success of the market. The intercept survey data indicates that, although higher income people were more likely to purchase local food overall, differences by income bracket were not significant in rural areas. It is notable that the two rural communities with more vibrant local food systems have significantly lower percent poverty than the other rural communities. This may be an important factor, but it is impossible given this data set to determine whether this difference is by chance. After all, the urban communities, which have vibrant farmers' markets, have significantly higher percent poverty than all of the rural communities.

Finding only a strong relationship between farmers' market success and the rural-urban difference, we tried looking at the characteristics of rural and urban consumers interviewed through the intercept surveys.

Cross-tabulations of rural and urban farmers' market consumers illustrated some differences (see Table 4). Rural farmers' market consumers were more likely than urban consumers to respond that they visited the farmers' market strictly to purchase food. Urban consumers were more likely to visit the farmers' market for the atmosphere and entertainment. Compared with rural consumers, more urban farmers' market customers said their markets had a variety of products and vendors and that their farmers' markets play a vital role in the community's economy.

These observations led to the question: are rural consumers just not interested in local food, or is there something else that limits the success of rural farmers' markets? The results presented above might lead us to assume that rural consumers are more prone to a market/industrial convention in terms of food. In other words, farmers' markets are viewed purely as a place to sell and buy produce. Urban residents, according to the results cited above, would follow a more interpersonal convention—viewing the farmers' market as a locus for interaction with others, rather than a purely commercial endeavor. In short, the trip to the farmers' market Saturday morning is about the social experience for the urban dweller. For rural people, it is more likely to be about buying quality produce for dinner.

Analysis of the intercept survey data found no significant differences among local food consumers based on level of civic participation. Additionally, responses from the intercept surveys showed many similarities between urban and rural consumers. Most respondents agreed that buying locally-grown products supports

TABLE 4: URBAN AND RURAL OPINIONS REGARDING FARMER'S MARKET AND LOCAL FOOD.

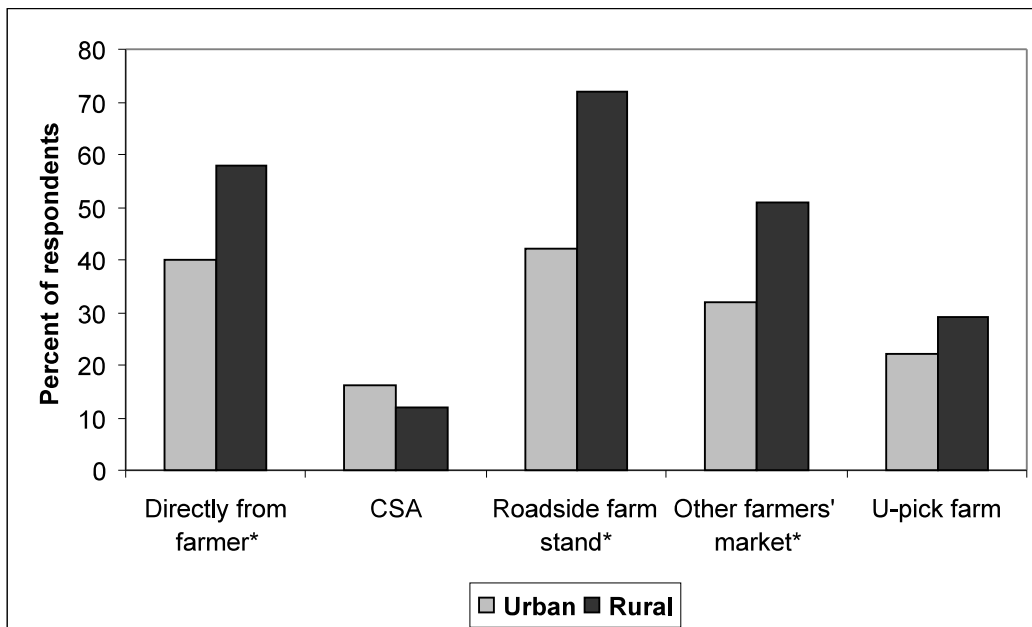
| | URBAN FARMERS' MARKET CONSUMERS (N=329) | | RURAL FARMERS' MARKET CONSUMERS (N=123) | | CHI SQUARE SIGNIFICANCE LEVELS |
|---|---|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| | NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS | NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS | NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS | NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS | |
| I visit the farmers' market strictly to purchase food. | 71% | 296 | 90% | 112 | .000 |
| I visit the farmers' market for the atmosphere and entertainment. | 88% | 283 | 65% | 97 | .000 |
| My community's farmers' market has a wide variety of products and vendors. | 94% | 296 | 73% | 106 | .000 |
| The farmers' market plays a vital role in my community's economy. | 94% | 233 | 82% | 91 | .005 |

Note: Rural markets included: Metamora, Effingham, Sullivan, and Taylorville; Urban markets included: Urbana and Bloomington.

local farmers (98 percent), and that naturally-grown food is healthy for their families (90 percent). Respondents also believed that consumers should have more locally-grown products available to them (95 percent) and that cafeterias in schools, hospitals, and other public institutions should serve food grown by local farmers (91 percent).

So if rural and urban consumers are equally supportive of local food, what else might explain the lower level of success at the rural farmers' markets? One important difference between urban and rural farmers' market consumers was the number of venues visited for local food purchases. Consumers at rural farmers' markets were more likely to have purchased locally-grown food from three other sources: directly from farmers, from a roadside farm stand, and at another farmers' market. Urban consumers, by contrast, were much more likely to limit their local food purchases to the farmers' market (see Figure 1). This suggests that urban consumers spend more of their food money at only one local food market, while rural consumers patronize several venues.

FIGURE 1. VENUES FOR LOCALLY GROWN FOOD PURCHASES UTILIZED BY FARMERS' MARKET CONSUMERS BASED ON FARMERS' MARKET INTERCEPT SURVEY RESPONSES.



NOTE: An asterisk * highlights differences significant at the .01 level.

It seems that location also matters in developing a local food market. Although downtown squares are idealized locations for a farmers' market, they are not always successful, as evidenced in the difference between the Metamora and Sullivan farmers' markets. The Metamora Farmers' Market emphasized their downtown square location and collaborated with local businesses and tourist attractions to make shopping at the farmers' market part of a Saturday morning excursion. Although the Sullivan Farmers' Market originated in the downtown square, most of the businesses were closed during the Friday-evening market hours, and the traffic in the square was limited. It is possible, then, that the development of marketing based on an interpersonal convention is critical to the success of a rural farmers' market. In other words, it could be, in fact, that the creation of a reason to be in the downtown area beyond the farmers' market itself creates a place of interaction among community members that significantly increases the patronage and therefore the success of the farmers' market. The examples above demonstrate that collaboration with the broader business and social service (museum) community could be the key to making this happen.

Considering Alternative Local Food Venues for Rural Communities

The case studies and data above indicate that a generalized approach to building local food systems does not promise success by itself. While farmers' markets are a popular venue for local food, not all communities will be able to support a local farmers' market. Community leaders interested in building their community's local food system will need to be creative in their approach. Success will not rest simply on changing consumer opinions about locally-grown food, but also on building upon the current shopping behaviors and lifestyles of local residents.

Fairbury, in Livingston County, Illinois, demonstrates one example of a successful alternative local food market in a rural community. With a town population of merely 4,000 residents and a county population of 40,000 people, Fairbury is a classic rural community approximately 115 miles southwest of Chicago. In 2004, two entrepreneurial farmers collaborated with Fairbury's sole grocery store, the independently-owned Dave's Supermarket. Dave's Supermarket is the only full-service grocery store within 15 miles of Fairbury. The farmers and Dave's Supermarket owners developed an indoor farmers' market within the produce section of the store. For a more detailed description of the Fairbury local food project, see Hultine et al. (2007, in press).

The business arrangement works through shared responsibilities for both the producers and store owners. The store gives the farmers a small amount of shelf

space, and the farmers are responsible for stocking the shelves, determining prices, and ensuring a quality presentation of their locally-grown products. The store provides barcodes that identify each product by the farm that produced it, and the products are scanned through the checkout lines along with other store products. The store receives a 20 percent cut from the sales of the local produce, and the farmers receive the remainder of the revenue.

In 2004, during the first summer season of the indoor farmers' market at Dave's Supermarket, three farms sold their products in the store, with total sales of \$850. In 2005, five farms participated and sales rose to \$2,009. By the end of 2006, eleven farms had joined the project, selling \$4,509 of local produce in the store. Sixteen farms participated in the 2007 season.

Conventions and Community Capitals in Fairbury

The Fairbury local food project is using the existing human, built, and financial capital within Fairbury, while also contributing additional opportunities to build community through these capitals. Although many producers are small market gardeners with little professional farming experience, there are several full-time farmers in the group, and all of the producers meet monthly to share ideas and advice. The producer group recruits and encourages new participants to start market gardens or experiment with small-scale farming, and has also encouraged several high-school-aged students to participate, which is viewed by the producers as an opportunity to help young people become interested in sustainable agriculture. In short, the Fairbury local food project producers are operating on a civic convention—producing locally to improve the sustainability of local farming. Although little built infrastructure currently exists within Livingston County to support the development of local food systems (such as businesses selling organic seed or inputs, processing facilities, etc.), 90 percent of land in Livingston County is used for farming operations (U.S. Census of Agriculture 2002). This would indicate that as the support and demand for local food develops there would be many opportunities for conventional farmers to transition acres of their farms to local food production and for new farmers to find acreage for food production. Additionally, the producer group decided to incorporate as a limited liability company for the 2007 season. This LLC could serve as a model of a local food business within the community, and has the potential to encourage other business development to build the infrastructure necessary for a successful local food system. The Fairbury local food project has benefited significantly from social relationships throughout the community. Several farmers and the grocery store owners are

members of community organizations and share information about their project within those groups. New business relationships are developing as local retailers learn about the success of the Dave's Supermarket project. The networks between consumers have also supported the project; 65 percent of customers surveyed in Dave's Supermarket responded that word of mouth was one of the most influential methods for learning about the local food products. In other words, the Fairbury local food project has used social capital in combining the opinion and interpersonal conventions to increase sales.

Additionally, although several participating producers are neighbors or extended family members, monthly producer planning meetings also strengthen relationships between the participating farmers. Again, bridging social capital becomes very important as a production strategy. Supply being the major limiting factor, local food producers have every incentive to try to build networks with other producers they can trust (again an interpersonal convention), rather than operating on a more classic market or industrial convention of competition with other producers based on price and quality.

In 2007 Fairbury celebrated its sesquicentennial anniversary.⁵ Besides its agricultural history, Fairbury has long supported family-owned local businesses within the community. One participating producer manages the oldest farmstead in Livingston County, and is a direct descendant of the farm's original owner. Dave's Supermarket opened in 1950 as an independent grocery store and remains under the ownership of the founding family. Eighty-seven percent of customers surveyed said they purchased products from the local farmers' shelves in the store to support local farmers and that they would buy more local products if available. Many participating producers view the Fairbury local food project as an opportunity to work with their families and to help them grow their farming operations to provide more full-time income.

Fairbury has seen an exceptional level of political support for their local food project. Local leaders have been supportive of the project and point out the value of the local food project and local farms as a tourism opportunity for the community. Labels on local food products showing farms in Fairbury and news articles about the project in local and state newspapers have provided positive publicity for the community, which local leaders appreciate. Local leaders are developing educational opportunities and business incentives that would support the development of local food businesses within their community.

⁵Fairbury, Illinois website. www.fairburyil.org. Retrieved February 27, 2007.

Our analysis indicates that the success of the Fairbury local food project is the result of multiple relationships. The development of social capital and linkages of local food production to cultural capital has been key in making the project a success—ultimately contributing to the development of political capital (in support for the project) and improvements in built capital in infrastructure to support the local food system development. The increasing financial returns are an important outcome indicator in the success of the project.

Convention theory can help us to understand some critical factors in production and consumption that make this project work. First, the producers have chosen to look at local food production not solely for selling surplus vegetables and fruit, using a classic market convention, but rather as part of a broader movement. They market based on valuing locally-produced food and saving local farms and farmers. In other words, their production is based on a civic convention. In doing so, they use the opinion and interpersonal conventions, building linkages to other farmers in the area and with longstanding local businesses. Consumers have responded in kind, as evidenced by the 87 percent of those surveyed who indicated interest in buying local foods at Dave's because it would help local farmers. In other words, these consumers used the civic convention in their buying decisions.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to understand the factors that contribute to vibrant local food systems in urban and rural communities using data from central Illinois. We did this through case studies of seven community-level local food systems: six farmers' markets and one alternative local food initiative.

Farmers' markets are clearly the most widely accepted tool for promoting local food at the community level. Our findings suggest that successful farmers' markets are built on bridging social capital between farmers and other businesses. They create the opportunity for consumers to meet each other as well as farmers, and the markets explicitly tie to other types of businesses, not just food producers.

This finding supports the literature on local food systems. For instance, Hinrichs (2000) asserts that local food markets are "embedded" within community context, and Lyson's (2004) depiction of civic agriculture argues that local food systems should be seen as part of a broader movement to rebuild communities. As such, local food systems must be seen as more than marketing local produce.

Convention theory (Biggert and Beamish 2003; Lassaut and Sylvander 1997; Thevenot 1997; Wilkinson 1997;) helps us to tie these social findings to economic principles. Urban farmers' markets clearly are successful not just because they

supply fresh produce, but also because they allow consumers to interact with each other and with farmers themselves. Thus, their success is the result of marketing and consumption through interpersonal and civic conventions. Consumers like to believe that what they buy from the farmers' market has added value in that it was produced and marketed so that is better for the earth and sustained local farmers (Barham 2003; Raynolds 2002).

The question is whether this effect is contingent on having an urbanized population. In other words, do communities have to be urban for this to work? Both the urban areas included in this study (Urbana and Bloomington) have successful farmers' markets. Only one of the four rural communities included in this study has a vibrant farmers' market. Some have suggested that the lack of success of farmers' markets in the rural communities of central Illinois suggests lack of interest in local food.

Our findings indicate that the difference is not necessarily in the attitudes regarding local food. We find that both urban and rural consumers value locally-grown food. For rural consumers, however, buying local food may be more about buying from individual local farmers they already know and trust, in addition to characteristics of high quality and price (opinion convention), and less about social interactions and civic engagement. We speculate that as rural consumers may already have more connections to farmers and agriculture than their urban counterparts, the rural farmers' market may not be as important in creating the locus for produce distribution under civic, interpersonal, and opinion conventions.

Social capital was critical in the development of the one example that we have of a successful rural farmers' market (Metamora) (Flora et al. 2005). The success of the Metamora farmers' market builds from the opportunity for the market to connect with other downtown businesses—from the museum to local restaurants—and is another indication of the level of social capital within the community. Individuals have tried to create these interactions in other communities as well, but without significant success, indicating that this is not a question of individual agency, but of the development of social capital among multiple social groups. The Sullivan case illustrates that lack of support from the business community makes it very difficult to market on a civic and interpersonal convention. Lacking support from the Chamber of Commerce and the local business community, the farmers' market ultimately relocated from downtown to the outskirts of town, presumably selling their produce based on an opinion convention—consumers return to buy those tasty locally-produced tomatoes while they are in season.

In an alternative rural local food project (Fairbury), the social organization between farmers and their existing connections with buyers and other community members has helped to embed the local food project in the community, building upon and creating new social relationships and cultural capital (the community's link to family farming). In other words, the investment in developing both bonding and bridging social capital, building relationships with alternative agriculture producers and with grocers, to expand consumer and producer networks may be critical in attempting to build rural local food systems using interpersonal and civic conventions (Barham 2003; Flora et al. 2005; Flora and Flora 2005).

As community and economic developers begin to think about building local food systems in their communities, not subscribing to a "build it and they will come" mindset about local food will be important. Local food systems will develop most successfully when they address the existing shopping behaviors and production and consumption conventions within a community. An initial look at the local food system case studies in this paper would suggest that urban residents are more interested in local food than rural residents. After all, the urban areas of Urbana and Bloomington have successful farmers' markets that attract large numbers of both producers and consumers. On the other hand, rural communities have less successful farmers' markets. What Metamora and Fairbury demonstrate, however, is that rural areas can have successful local food *systems*. In Metamora, local leaders marketed local foods on a civic and interpersonal convention by ensuring that the local food project was connected with other community events and establishments and thus developing social capital.

A similar strategy has not worked to date in Taylorville, however. Fairbury has used a different strategy than Metamora and Taylorville. The strategy has been to encourage farmers and local businesses to work together in creating a local food system marketing through local grocery businesses. The development of bridging and bonding social capital among farmers and between farmers and local business owners has been crucial to this initiative. The production, marketing, and consumption of locally-grown food in Fairbury uses a combination of the interpersonal and civic convention—associating local production with the support of local farms.

There is not a one-size-fits all option for the development of local food systems. Hinrichs (2000), Lyson (2004), and Bregendahl and Flora (2006) have all argued that social capital, embeddedness, and the development of civic community are critical to the emerging alternative food system. Barham (2003) and Smith et al. (2006) have demonstrated that alternative, local food production systems operate

on a fundamentally different set of assumptions than the conventional food system—civic and interpersonal conventions rather than market and industrial conventions.

Our findings support these authors' conclusions that local food systems operate on a civic convention and that embeddedness and social capital are key components. We add to this literature in arguing that the development of alternative food systems based on different marketing conventions from the conventional system does not necessarily happen spontaneously. The variation in our case studies demonstrates that especially in rural communities, the development of alternative, embedded local food systems is the result of the intentional development of social capital around the production and consumption of food. Through these interactions, producers, consumers, and intermediaries are encouraged to view the local food system through a civic convention—where all in the value chain perceive themselves as doing more than producing, distributing, or buying cheap or tasty fruits and vegetables. Rather, support of local farmers and farming through buying healthy food is seen as a critical part of why people produce and buy. The example of Fairbury demonstrates an additional critical point: establishment of a local food system in rural communities is not necessarily dependent on the formation or existence of a farmers' market. Indeed that may not be the optimal venue.

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