Local motivations, regional implications: scaling from local to regional food systems in northeastern North Carolina

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“How can I help my home community?”
To do so, may need to scale up beyond the community to the region.
Scaling up presents challenges and opportunities

- Business development
- Discourse/messaging
- Implications for developing resilient regional systems
Research methodologies

• Case study: operations of Working Landscapes, 2011-present
• Two Community Voice Method stakeholder engagement projects
  • County scale: *Growing Local/Buying Local*, 2010-11
  • Regional scale: *Growing Opportunities*, 2017-18


Case study: Working Landscapes
Our place-based motivations
Engaging local stakeholders, 2010-11
Goals identified by local stakeholders in 2011

1. Assist small farmers
2. Build farm-to-fork infrastructure
3. Consumer education
4. Engage youth

Working Landscapes’ programs today
2. Build farm-to-fork infrastructure
Produce processing facility development
The Chopped Produce Initiative: our value-added produce value chain
Chopped Produce Initiative so far

- Growth in volume of produce processed:
  - 3000 lbs. in 2013
  - 40,000 lbs. in 2017
- Served school districts in 18 counties
- Have learned what works and doesn’t work; positioned for growth

High school students harvesting collards for CPI from school farm, Halifax County
Next steps for Chopped Produce Initiative

- To achieve long-term viability: 600,000 lbs./yr.
- Renovate facility
- Add washed, fresh-cut produce
Scaling up: business development challenges and opportunities
Scenario 1: school districts order one product per week

Market needed: 23 counties / 159,051 students
Scenario 2: school districts order two products per week

Market needed: 13 counties / 104,469 students
Scenario 3: school districts order three products per week

Market needed: 11 counties / 57,666 students
As place-based ventures scale up, enter into interaction with other ventures

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Scaling up: discursive challenges and opportunities

Local conversations and regional conversations are different
The food system: the local perspective
The food system: the regional perspective

- Farmers
- Distributors
- Working Landscapes Food Hub
- Other Food Hubs
- School districts & other institutions
- Consumers
Place-based food system leaders across northeastern NC are also taking part in the regional conversation:

- Restaurateur
- Food hub director
- Grassroots nonprofit
- University administrator
- School nutrition director
- Farmer
Beyond these leaders, though, support for regional value chains is not yet widespread

- Impacts of regional food initiatives distributed, so less impact in local community
- To stakeholders in home community, can feel like a betrayal of place-based mandate
Challenge: increasing visibility of and support for regional value chains
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Conclusion: regional food system narratives can honor and extend place-based motivations

• Triple-bottom line imperatives

• Connection food’s origins; traceability

• Supporting small, family farms

• Product quality, e.g. freshness

• Expanding food access

• Economic impact; job creation
... while also making discursive contributions that are distinctly regional

- Establishing a sense of identity at a regional scale
- Communicate the importance of scale in the development of food system initiatives
- Reveal multi-step value chains in their entirety (these have been intentionally obscured by global food industry)
- Bridge rural-urban divides
Need to align resources and stakeholders with regional narratives

- Government agencies (local, state, federal): need regional planning
- Food system intermediaries: coordination, not competition
- Public institutions: anchor system with procurement commitments
- Marketing/education
- Funding: aligned with planning
- Research, data collection
Research to move regional food systems ahead

• Research not just to improve academic understandings of food systems, but to help to establish shared understandings among the stakeholders in the systems.

• This is the goal of our Community Voice Method work

• If deployed in this way, research can be vital in aligning interests and advancing regional food system development.
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From “local” to “regional:” what does that mean?