

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

Overview of Project

While Washtenaw, Monroe, Lenawee, Wayne and Jackson counties (referred to hereafter as the “Study Area”) in the southeastern region of Michigan was characterized by much economic growth and urbanization throughout the 20th century, the region still boasted over 750,000 acres of agricultural lands at the beginning of the 21st century (U.S. Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service 2002). Michigan’s unique geography, including two large, primarily flat peninsulas surrounded by four of the five Great Lakes, contributes to its designation as the second most agriculturally diverse state in the United States. Michigan’s 50,000 farmers grow over 125 crops, engendering a farm industry that contributes over \$50 billion to the state’s economy (Michigan Land Use Institute 2006). Yet, like many U.S. states, thousands of acres of farmland are converted annually to other uses and family farmers are hard pressed to remain solvent in a sector increasingly dominated by corporate farming and economies of scale. Consequently, development pressures and poor returns on their products are forcing many small and mid-sized farms to dissolve each year.

The Study Area is also home to the largest city and metropolitan area in the state and one of the largest in the nation. Over two million people call Detroit and its surrounding suburbs home, and over 300,000 others live in cities and villages within Washtenaw County, the second most populous county within the Study Area after Wayne County. This population represents a considerable consumer base for the more agricultural counties of Monroe, Lenawee and Jackson. Despite the fact that the region produces a wide variety of agricultural food commodities, its residents consume only a fraction of those items. Instead, the majority of food produced is shipped out of the state, leaving food that is grown hundreds, if not thousands of miles away, to be consumed by the region’s residents. Furthermore, amidst this large-scale exchange of commodities, thousands of residents in the area lack reliable access to affordable, nutritious, culturally-appropriate foods.

There are as many definitions for local food systems as there are examples of them around the world. Generally speaking, “local food system” refers to “new, consciously formed systems, which are characterized by a close producer-consumer relationship” (Vergunst 2001). Local food systems support long-term connections; meet economic, social, health and environmental needs; link producers and markets via locally-focused infrastructure; promote environmental health; and provide competitive advantage to local food businesses (Regional Food Systems Working Group 2006). Of

the number of local food systems in place and thriving throughout the United States, the most successful networks boast a common factor: a major metropolitan area within close proximity to fertile farmland. Based on this observation, southeastern Michigan is seen by many to be ripe for the development of a more localized food system (Davis *et al.* 2004).

Benefits of a Local Food System

The potential benefits of such a system are numerous. The local economy is bolstered as less money is diverted to national or transnational corporations based outside of the region, and local businesses satisfy unmet demands or create new or more efficient systems for the production and movement of foods (Regional Food Systems Working Group 2006). These opportunities help to strengthen the local economy by growing the agricultural sector, creating jobs, providing more choices for consumers, contributing to the local tax base, and reinvesting local money exchanged for food back into local farms and businesses (Che *et al.* 2005; Regional Food Systems Working Group 2006).

In a viable local food system, producers and consumers are linked via efficient infrastructures, which can provide a competitive advantage for local farmers, processors, distributors, retailers, and consumers alike (Regional Food Systems Working Group 2006). Farmers receive a greater return for their produce when there are fewer intermediaries. For example, direct marketing to consumers (e.g., farmers' markets, farm stands, and Community Supported Agriculture) increases returns to farmers (Cantrell *et al.* 2006), often decreases prices for consumers, and may promote more environmentally-sound farming practices. By sharing the risks and rewards of food production, processing, distribution, and retail with other local partners, farmers and businesses can explore opportunities to produce new varieties of foods or expand existing ventures to meet a local or regional need (Griffin *et al.* 2003).

A strong local food system can also result in positive effects on community development and revitalization (Regional Food Systems Working Group 2006). Consumers receive fresher, healthier food and the opportunity to develop a relationship with the farmers and a connection to the origins of their nourishment (Regional Food Systems Working Group 2006). This, in turn, helps to support the viability of small and medium-sized family farms and foster a sense of place, culture, history, and ecology within a region (Che *et al.* 2005; Regional Food Systems Working Group 2006). Similarly, a strong local food system and informed land use policy and local decision-making can help create healthier communities; the strategic preservation of farmland and the production of healthy and

accessible foods can combat urban sprawl, obesity, and hunger (Tufts Food Awareness Project 1994; Tauber *et al.* 2002).

Environmental benefits are also numerous. Paramount among them is the decreased energy and fuel consumption with fewer miles needed for shipping, depending on the mode of transportation and volume of goods transported per load (The Economist 2006). Local farmers that have a direct connection to the consumer through farmers markets and other networks are also more likely to take greater care to grow fresh and healthy foods; farmers that market their products locally do not typically engage in the types of harmful practices common in conventional agriculture. When foods are grown and consumed locally, harmful chemicals are not required to preserve the foods for long periods of time (David Suzuki Foundation 2004). Since local foods are harvested and then processed or sold to the consumer within a matter of hours or days instead of weeks or months, foods are fresher and often have a greater nutritional value when purchased because they can mature fully before being harvested and consumed (Tufts Food Awareness Project 1994; David Suzuki Foundation 2004). Thus, local food systems can help to meet the economic, social, health, and environmental needs of communities and residents within a region (Palan 2005).

Background

This master's project builds upon the 2004 local food system report, entitled *Toward a Sustainable Food System: Assessment and Action Plan for Localization in Washtenaw County, Michigan* (Davis *et al.* 2004), which was conducted by a team of master's students at the University of Michigan's School of Natural Resources and Environment. This previous report made a compelling argument for the viability of a local food system in Washtenaw County, Michigan. Briefly, the primary components of the report were: 1) a literature review contrasting the impacts of industrialization and localization in food and farming in the United States; 2) an analysis of eleven case studies detailing the success and failures of creating an intentional local food system; 3) a food-shed report of Washtenaw County that examined population demographics, agriculture and the environment, food distribution systems, food consumption, and community food security and access; 4) a stakeholder assessment of the Washtenaw County Food System; and 5) an analysis and action plan for localizing the Washtenaw County Food System.

Within a few months of the release of the report, a few dozen individuals representing restaurants, farmers, growers, local governments, universities, and community members came together to discuss

how they might bring the report's recommendations to fruition. These individuals hail not only from Washtenaw, but also Wayne, Monroe, Jackson, and Lenawee counties, more fully representing all stakeholders in the regional agriculture-based economy. The group is now recognized as the leadership team of the Food System Economic Partnership (FSEP), an Ann Arbor-based nonprofit organization.

Barely a year after its charter members first convened, it is driven by the group's overwhelming enthusiasm for the project, its recommendations, and a shared sense that an intentional localized food system has the unique potential to reinvigorate the region's economy, preserve family farms, and promote sustained food security of all of its residents. Yet, in order to build FSEP's capacity to spearhead the development of the local food system and ensure its sustained viability, the group's zeal must be buttressed with evidence and resources to leverage support among stakeholders and potential funders. As such, this master's project work has revolved around the design and implementation of the tools FSEP needs to generate this support. Through literature review, case studies, and primary research through surveys and interviews, we have attempted to review the region's assets and unmet demands in order to identify and prioritize the opportunities for strategic agricultural economic development. Building upon the previous master's project case for local food systems, we aim to help develop a strong and enduring local food system in southeastern Michigan.

Description of Partners

Food System Economic Partnership

The Food System Economic Partnership (FSEP) is an urban-rural collaboration to enable strong farms, healthy cities, community wealth, and job creation in southeastern Michigan. FSEP was officially launched in the beginning of 2005 to identify economic opportunities and implement creative solutions to chronic issues relevant to the food system in the region. The strength of FSEP comes from the combined effort of five county administrations, farm organization leaders, food industry heads, community groups, and food system and economic development experts and resource providers (Food System Economic Partnership 2006). This master's project team has worked closely with FSEP to develop their preliminary goals as an organization.

Michigan State University Extension (MSUE)

The MSUE serves the communities of Michigan through knowledge-based education. The agricultural and natural resource arm of the MSUE researches topics that apply to the farming

communities of Michigan. Among their many scientific, economic, and social focuses is a dedication to promoting Michigan-produced food products. Mike Score is an agent of the MSUE working toward increasing the economic opportunities within a local food system. He works closely with FSEP and brings a reservoir of knowledge in the areas of design of production agriculture research, public meeting facilitation, public speaking, program planning, and team building. Mr. Score has extensive training in agronomy, public policy deliberation, conflict management, business planning, adult education, grain marketing, leadership development, and program evaluation.

Goals and Audience

The primary objectives of this research endeavor were to assist FSEP in developing resources and tools to identify unmet local consumer demands and opportunities for agricultural economic development, including gathering data to inform the future work of FSEP, identifying potential barriers and opportunities for a localized food system, developing research-based resources for FSEP outreach to the public and policy makers, and creating tools to assist FSEP with measuring and evaluating organizational progress. These objectives were accomplished via a review of the existing food system literature; the compilation of regional data; the development, implementation and analysis of a multi-sector food system survey within the Study Area; the conduct of interviews with food system stakeholders; and Participatory Action Research through engagement with FSEP's Leadership Team and committees. In partnership with FSEP, major outcomes from this research include:

- A review of local food system research focused tightly on issues and components of local food systems germane to the region;
- A profile of the local food system within the five-county area intended to be distributed broadly to residents within the Study Area as a learning tool for communicating the ideas and concepts underlying a local food system;
- A mechanism for conducting an organizational assessment of FSEP in order to document successes and areas for improvement on an annual basis; and
- A presentation and summary of research findings and data collected from a multi-sector survey and stakeholder interviews.

In support of FSEP's mission to create local, agricultural economic development opportunities and enhance community viability in southeastern Michigan through creative solutions, outcomes from

this venture will inform future efforts to develop food system networks, collaborative multi-stakeholder partnerships, and entrepreneurial opportunities. This report will serve as a baseline assessment of the local food system for FSEP and will be the initial foundation for a more comprehensive inventory of the food system to be conducted by FSEP over time as they continue to implement their mission and initiatives.