







# Macro-Level Demands and Barriers to the Creation of Local Food Systems

## A Preliminary Literature Review



### Research Questions:

-  What are current trends on a(n) national/international level which influence the development of food systems?
-  Which groups (social, political, etc.) primarily benefit from the current structure of mainstream food systems?
-  Do these groups benefit disproportionately at the expense of other groups under the current structure of mainstream food systems?
-  If the aforementioned disparities exist, how do they translate themselves into barriers (institutional and otherwise) for other groups?

### How are Food Marketplaces in the U. S. Structured?

#### From the producers and distributors...

Conventional agriculture in the U.S. is shifting from smaller, owner-operated farms to larger, non-locally owned industrial farms. These farms are often vertically integrated with processors and distributors of food, giving processors and distributors increasing control the quantities and methods of food production (Che, et al, 2005), (Conner, 2004).

This often leaves little (if any) room for many farmers to make decisions on how to maximize return on their investment, creating a market situation in which processors and distributors can effectively set the prices for the food products at the expense of farmers' livelihoods. Farmers must either choose to operate within this perilously imbalanced system, find a niche market outside of the conventional markets, or leave the agricultural industry altogether (Lyson and Gupstill, 2004), (Welsh, 1997).



Globalization is accelerating the process of food system integration. Nationally and internationally integrated conventional food distributors (large supermarkets such as Safeway and Kroger, food processors such as Tyson, restaurants such as McDonalds, etc.) cur-

rently are able to heavily process and distribute inexpensive food products due to the availability of cheap energy sources. Production is often characterized by large monoculture farms which are dependant on external sources of energy, chemicals, etc. to reshape nature into a more favorable growing environment.



Cheap distribution/transportation energy costs allow foodstuffs to be shipped over great distances with little regard for the freshness, quality, and seasonality of those foodstuffs (Box, 2005), (Conner, 2004).

Governmental policies (federal, state, and sometimes local) that encourage subsidization of a narrow range of bulk conventionally-grown/produced agricultural products (corn, wheat, soya, etc.) end up forming the base components for the range of processed foods that vertically integrated food distributors use to fill supermarket shelves. This places producers and distributors with a local focus at a severe disadvantage in today's marketplace, as the cost of their products often reflect the actual costs of labor, production, and energy inputs (Wilkins, 2005).



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Lack of a common language and framework in which to talk about how current food systems work and how they can be changed is placing advocates of local food systems at a competitive disadvantage. Although recent research and coordination efforts have helped to greatly improve communications and ideas between theoretical researchers, community citizens, and applied practitioners (all of whom come from a wide array of disciplines and professions), a simplified widespread language would help to create a social framework in which broader discussions and changes can take place (Feenstra, 2002).

### ...to the consumer

The structure of today's conventional food systems has led to a disconnection of many people from their sources of foods as interactions between consumers, processors, and producers become compartmentalized through distributors (Koc and Dahlberg, 1999). Many people either have no idea where their food comes from or have a highly globalized notion of "local systems" (Selfa and Qazi, 2005). Many consumers now perceive themselves as being "time-deficient", and are willing to pay more for processed food products that require little preparation (regardless of whether reductions in quality are a trade-off for this convenience) (Box, 2005).



Often, organic and locally-produced foods are seen as "elitist" by many consumers due to the disparities in pricing between those foods and conventionally produced foods (and their reduced availability in many areas). Due to these perceived economic conditions

(created by the disparities between markets mentioned earlier in this summary), the burden of responsible consumption now often falls to "progressive producers", who must directly market or distribute to consumers to entice them to change their dietary behaviors and buy locally (often without the support of large distributors or processors). In the U.S., this type of assistance for consumers is provided primarily through the use of information to differentiate products that positively reflect their values. Consumers must

study voluntary labeling, read direct marketing materials, or make local contact with producers to determine which products minimize negative externalities and align most closely with their values.

The prime voluntary labeling method in the U.S. is currently the organic food label. Organic labeling currently concerns itself only with information on how the food was produced, so at best it can only be used as a proxy for a farm's impact on the environment (Conner, 2004), (Gussow, 1999).



Bringing people into closer contact with their sources of food may not guarantee that issues of race, class, gender, etc. will be lessened. Often the opposite may be true as localized structures of power intensify segregation and inequity against groups already established as minorities in the community. These inequities can be developed as cultural differences diminish certain groups' voices in decision making processes, local patterns of land development favor certain land uses (often non-food related) to the benefit of some groups over others, and societal larger processes which influence local matters (governmental funding for community programs, tax policies, etc.) are brushed aside as being "immutable" (Allen, 1999).

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### **For More Information:**

To submit additional resources or to provide feedback, please contact the University of Michigan Local Food Masters' Project Team at [foodsys@umich.edu](mailto:foodsys@umich.edu).

The Local Food Masters' Project Team consists of five University of Michigan graduate students from the School of Natural Resources and Environment and the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning.

Our objective is to work with FSEP throughout the 2006 calendar year to provide research support and tools to begin to realize the organization's preliminary goals.

Primary outcomes will include: 1) a review of local food system research focused tightly on issues and components of local food systems germane to the Southeast Michigan region; (2) a profile of the community food system within the five-county area; (3) an in-depth analysis of the viability of an intentional local food system in the region with recommendations for increasing access to and promoting efficient, effective distribution of local foods; and (4) an organizational assessment of FSEP during its first year in existence. In support of FSEP's mission, outputs will inform future efforts to develop food system networks and collaborative multi-stakeholder partnerships, and to promote entrepreneurial opportunities within a five-county region of Southeast Michigan.