

Introduction

Before exploring the nuts and bolts of specific *Growing Home* strategies, let's take a step back and look at the long-term view. Community-based food and agriculture system development is an incremental process. Some of the changes we need to make will take five, ten, or even twenty years of persistent work. They will involve not only farmers but citizens, consumers, institutions, businesses and policy makers. Think of your role today as creating the steppingstones toward a better future for your community or region.

This chapter explores three underlying principles that will help your community build a strong foundation for long-term food and agriculture system development. These principles are: (1) engaging the wider community in the development process; (2) building a strong collaborative partnership; and (3) integrating social, environmental and economic concerns in the development process.

**Engaging the Community
in Creating a New Vision**

In an ideal world, food and agriculture would be an essential part of any community's comprehensive planning and economic development efforts. But too often agriculture is seen as the very opposite of development! Or it is seen as the substrate upon which development takes place. It is not recognized for its contributions to local economies, environments, and community quality of life. It is important for advocates to ensure that food and agriculture have a strong emphasis in all local planning and economic-development initiatives.

Participatory planning engages the community and builds skills for democracy.

But it is not enough to simply add food and agriculture into the conventional, expert-driven processes of planning and development. The public should be engaged, not only because of the need to educate the community about food and agriculture, but also because creating change will depend on the commitment of many different interest groups. What is needed is a participatory planning process that involves the community in creating a vision for the future of local food and agriculture systems, and taking the steps needed to get there. This kind of

process builds the community’s democratic decision-making skills, and strengthens its capacity to solve its own problems in the future.

Figure 3. Expert planning vs. participatory planning	
Expert planning	Participatory planning
Goals defined by problems	Goals defined by shared vision
Treats symptoms	Treats root causes
Deals with separate pieces of complex systems	Deals with whole complex systems of interacting parts
Piecemeal solutions create new problems	Builds on synergies within whole systems
Experts on top	Experts on tap
Too many cooks spoil the broth	Many heads better than one
Focus on economics	Balances multiple goals

Experts on tap, not on top. One practitioner describes the difference between conventional and participatory strategic planning as follows:

There are many methodologies for developing strategic plans. Most are based on a quasi-scientific model, which systematically assesses resources and constraints and develops plans which are intended to maximize the use of assets and minimize the effects of liabilities. These plans are typically generated by professionals either on staff or on a consulting basis.

Although professionally developed plans often seek input from local residents and others, rarely are they truly participatory. Participatory planning seeks to involve the community directly, and from the beginning, in constructing their own plans and working together to help implement them. Professional help is provided to structure and facilitate the participatory process. (Rich, 1996)

Expert-driven planning may be appropriate in situations with a clear-cut problem and a narrow range of solutions. Some aspects of food and agriculture systems development lend themselves to this approach, such as the characterization and mapping of farmland resources in a community which is developing a purchase-of-development-rights program. But the long-term process of rebuilding the connections between agriculture and the local economy requires a much more participatory process.

The role of consultants

Consultants can be used very effectively in community-based food and agriculture systems development. For example, they can be used to provide guidance in designing a sound collaborative process, help facilitate certain phases such as a community visioning process, conduct a specific study, or provide other support during a particular phase of planning, analysis or implementation. But overdependence on consultants will undermine the effort by weakening the sense of ownership and commitment of local participants. No matter how good he or she is, a consultant's report or recommendations will simply sit on a shelf if an organized team is not ready and committed to act on them. Building that shared commitment to action is the goal of participatory planning.

Building a Strong Collaborative Partnership

Although the initiative for local food and agriculture development often comes from a small group, no single organization has all the resources of staff time, expertise, credibility and connections to be successful. A partnership effort must be nurtured to draw on the diversity and depth of resources found in many different organizations and constituent groups. Strong collaborative relationships among these groups provide a foundation for food and agriculture systems development over the long term. Building this foundation requires a serious up-front investment of time and energy in team building. But without such investment, the effectiveness of your efforts will be minimal.

Building solid, collaborative relationships with partner groups is the best long-term investment you can make.

The process may depend on creating alliances with some pretty strange bedfellows. For example, environmental activists may see agriculture as the cause of problems with local water quality. But by forming a collaborative relationship with farmers, such activists will be able to build trust, improve communication, and find more effective ways of working with farmers to address environmental concerns. Likewise, farmers may at first be hesitant to work with an environmental organization, but they soon find that collaboration provides opportunities to educate environmentalists about agriculture's many positive environmental impacts.

Potential partners in community-based food and agriculture systems development

- Farmers, farm employees and farm organizations
- Area residents (consumers)

(continued)

- Cooperative Extension educators
- Local governments
- Churches, schools and civic organizations
- Economic-development professionals and land-use planners
- State agriculture departments
- USDA and other agencies
- Farm and commercial lenders
- Agribusinesses
- Environmental and conservation groups, and land trusts
- Food-marketing businesses, institutional food services
- Food banks, food-assistance programs
- Restaurants and chefs
- Business community, Chamber of Commerce

Each participating constituency has different strengths and different perspectives to offer. Farm organizations and farmers themselves are obviously key participants. Consumer, environmental, hunger and civic organizations have many different reasons to be inter-

Each partner group has unique resources to contribute.

ested in local farming, and they offer networks of expertise, volunteers and ideas that may be new to the agriculture community. County Cooperative Extension offices typically offer strong ties to the agriculture community, solid technical expertise, and lots of experience in community education and facilitation. Planning and economic development agencies offer entirely

different arrays of expertise and capabilities. Local governments have the power to make or break many proposed projects. And so on. Community-based food and agriculture systems development brings all these players into the process, educating them about agriculture’s benefits and potential, and helping them to define their roles in strengthening agriculture.

Collaboration is a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more groups to achieve results they are more likely to achieve together than alone. It’s a durable and pervasive relationship where participating groups generate new structures and share full commitment to a common mission.

Why collaborate?

- To build relationships and social capital.
- To educate people about the situation and options.
- To improve the quality of plans and decisions.
- To expand the political base for agriculture.
- To expand the base of resources for action.
- To better achieve agriculture and community development goals.

Collaboration is more than **cooperation**, which is a shorter-term, informal relationship that typically exists without a clearly defined mission, structure or planning effort. And it's more than **coordination**, where there may be more formal relationships and understanding of mission but where authority still rests with individual groups. Genuine collaboration begins very early in the development process, before the project idea is hatched, the situation analyzed, the plan of work drafted, and proposals written.

The skills needed for effective collaboration are the people skills of teamwork, communication and group process. Some people naturally function well in a team situation, but even those used to working independently can build these skills through experience and training. The collaborative process itself builds the skills of participants so they learn over time to function more and more effectively together. The community's "human capital" and its "social capital" are both enhanced as people learn to listen to each other, use conflict constructively, come to agreement on shared values, and build momentum toward their long-term goals.

People skills and an upbeat attitude are essential.

Barriers to collaboration

To be sure, many barriers impede effective collaboration. Lack of trust among potential collaborators is a common problem facing community food and agriculture development organizers. When there is a past history of conflict, for example, between two agencies or between local farmers and environmentalists, it may take some time to heal these wounds enough so that the groups can work comfortably together. Organizers need to be sensitive to unspoken fears and conflicts, and not push too far, too fast.

When there is a significant degree of mistrust between potential collaborators, people may express a desire to limit the process to groups they "feel comfortable" with.

Take time to build trust and open up communications.

But rather than exclude such potential partners, it's better to open up communications and begin building trust. Through structured opportunities for dialogue, people can gradually get to know each other, recognize their common values, and eventually get fears or misconceptions out on the table in safe and supportive environments.

Barriers to collaboration

- Past conflict
- Lack of trust
- Organizational inflexibility
- Competition for resources, real or perceived
- Turf thinking
- Unclear benefits to collaborators

Organizers with Dutchess County, N.Y., Cooperative Extension recognized the importance of building trust early in their community agriculture development efforts. Long before there was any discussion of an action agenda, the community-development specialist

took time to ease the tensions and increase understanding between agriculturalists and the rest of the community. She organized a series of informal dialogue meetings, which offered low-key forums for farmers and others in the community to discuss current issues and concerns and to get to know each other. This grew into the Information and Dialogue Exchange on Agriculture (IDEA), a diverse group that began meeting regularly and developing projects. Over many years this flexible, collaborative network of partners has spun off a series of pioneering food and agriculture systems development projects, including initiatives for public education, agritourism, regional identity and market development.

Another important barrier is organizational inflexibility. Collaboration requires organizations to enter into new and often uncharted relationships with other groups. It may call for shared decision-making authority and accountability. Sometimes it's a challenge to accommodate these relationships within the usual structure and function of participating organizations. An overly narrow or outdated mission statement may prevent some organizations from taking advantage of emerging opportunities for collaboration.

Be clear about what is expected of collaborators, and keep the door open to potential partner groups.

It's important to be very clear about what is expected of collaborating groups, to build a track record, and to keep the door open to potential partner groups who might be hesitant at first. NY Farms!, for example, is a collaborative public education effort involving many different agricultural, environmental and consumer groups. Signing on as a formal member of NY Farms! was hard for some organizations because it required entering into a shared decision-making process which was unprecedented for them. Fortunately,

organizers found other ways to keep these groups informed and involved that didn't require them to go outside their organizational comfort zones.

Concern about competition with other organizations or interest groups is another deterrent to collaboration. Potential partner groups may worry that they won't get their fair share of public visibility or perhaps funding. Protecting claimed turf by resisting collaboration with related organizations is an understandable response if the benefits of collaboration are not very clear.

Potential collaborators have a legitimate need to know "what's in it for me?" The bottom line is that collaboration works well when it achieves benefits that can't be achieved by its participants working alone. Organizers need to be able to make the case that the results of collaboration will be worth the effort.

The Three-Legged Stool: Society, Environment and Economy

Development should never sacrifice the social or environmental well-being of a community to achieve economic goals.

The concept of “sustainable agriculture,” as well as the broader concept of “sustainable development,” involves the interdependence of social, environmental and economic well-being. Long-term sustainability rests on all three, just as a three-legged stool needs all of its legs. The legs of that stool are the resources that a community needs to manage to achieve its goals. We can think of these resources as different forms of capital—social, environmental and economic—that can be nurtured and reinvested, or squandered.

Conventional development thinking has tended to focus on economic outcomes, often to the detriment of the cultural vitality or ecological health of an area. But as more and more communities are discovering, all three need nurturing and protecting simultaneously.

Social capital: Building the civic community

The first leg of the sustainability stool is a strong civic community, with a high level of social capital. Social capital can be loosely translated as “the ability of people in a community to work together to make things happen.” A civic community is a problem-solving community. It has many forms of social organization that enable people to cooperate and coordinate their activities for mutual benefit. These include strong community networks, a widespread sense of shared history and values, effective working relationships based on trust, widespread opportunities for political discourse, and effective, democratic decision-making processes.

Social capital enhances a community’s ability to generate its own solutions to problems.

A well-designed development process will strengthen the civic community and create social capital by building a strong foundation of communication and collaboration among diverse interest groups. This process will enhance a community’s investments in other forms of capital as well. For example, let’s say Community A and Community B both receive a \$20,000 grant to create a land-use plan to protect critical farming areas. Community A has some strong social capital to invest—it already has well-established, dynamic working relationships and a high level of trust among agricultural, economic development, conservation and local government groups. In one year they have a well-written plan with broad support, and several working groups already moving into action. Community B doesn’t have this social capital to invest. The committee that wrote the grant (a small group of agriculturalists that has been talking to itself for years) hires a consultant to study the situation and make recommendations. A year later, the report sits on a shelf untouched.

Environmental capital: Protecting and enhancing the natural resource base

The second leg of the sustainability stool is a healthy ecosystem, one that can support agricultural production and all other human activities now and far into the future. Agriculture is a major contributor to healthy ecosystems, as long as farms are well managed to control adverse impacts on air, water and soil quality. Compared to areas of residential or commercial development, farming is now recognized as a preferred land use in terms of its impact on water quality.

Agriculture development should not jeopardize the health of ecosystems.

Community-based food and agriculture system development should be careful not to encourage any form of agriculture that jeopardizes the health of ecosystems in the region. Some production systems, such as large-scale livestock confinement systems, may have serious adverse effects on local air and water quality. These systems deserve careful scrutiny, not just by farmers making investments in them, but by all members of a community. The potential economic

advantages of such systems to their operators must be balanced with the need to protect the environment and quality of life for the rest of the community.

Other forms of agriculture have direct environmental benefits, and should be encouraged whenever economically feasible, including those with improved systems for managing manure and synthetic fertilizers; grazing systems which balance livestock to the area of land being farmed; integrated pest management systems that reduce the use of pesticides; creation of wetlands and other wildlife habitat on farms; on-farm composting; and many other measures to protect soil, water and air quality.

Some agriculture development programs provide benefits or services to farmers who agree to implement technologies or farming practices that enhance the environment. These incentive programs encourage farmers who otherwise might have a difficult time affording the needed improvements. This is one important approach to linking environmental and economic investments in food and agriculture systems development.

Economic capital: Creating financial security

The third leg of the sustainability stool is a solid economy that provides financial security for all. Of course, the reality is that many families, both farm and non-farm, are not financially secure. Increasing the economic returns to farmers is a high priority in many agriculture development efforts. There are also economic benefits that can be achieved for non-farmers, for example through the creation of new jobs and new business opportunities in the food system.

Most food and agriculture systems development efforts try to achieve explicit economic outcomes. These run the gamut from increased investments in agricultural firms and

infrastructure, to improved net farm profits, to higher value of products sold, and to greater volumes of production. By linking social and environmental outcomes to these economic goals, your community can be more selective about proposed development strategies and avoid unintended negative consequences.

Summary

This chapter examined three principles that provide a foundation for *Growing Home*. **Engaging the wider community** brings diverse perspectives into the process and builds the community's capacity to define its own future. **Building a strong collaborative partnership** capitalizes on the knowledge, skills and resources of multiple organizations, agencies and interest groups. And **integrating social, environmental and economic concerns** in the development process will help prevent unintended negative impacts of food and agriculture system development.

Chapter 2 References and Resources

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