Food Hubs 101
A Learning Event & Stakeholder Convening in Greater Washington

Meeting Proceedings
Tuesday, October 22, 2013
Chevy Chase, MD
Executive Summary

Across the country, momentum is growing for transparent and equitable food systems that foster healthy people and healthy environments. Organizations throughout the Greater Washington region are developing innovative ways to get fresh, healthy food from local, small and medium-sized farms to a variety of consumers, including those in vulnerable or underserved communities. These farms generally do not produce enough by themselves to supply large customers like schools, hospitals, and in some cases, restaurants. Enter food hubs. Food hubs specialize in aggregating products from small and medium-sized farms and getting them into new markets. The community members and institutions that purchase this food have the security of knowing where their food comes from, and in many instances the food hubs that deliver it provide additional community services like nutrition education.

Food Hubs 101 was an event that gathered about 70 people interested in learning about food hubs in various stages of development in the Greater Washington region. During this first gathering of its kind focused on the region, policy experts and practitioners gave presentations and participated in panel discussions on how food hubs operate and how they can be leveraged to improve equity and inclusion throughout the food system. Recommendations were provided on how funders can support the development of these organizations. Challenges and success stories from a cross-section of food hubs were also shared to provide real life examples of issues raised by presenters. Attendees reported that they came away invigorated. Many found the networking and data on food hubs particularly valuable. Nearly all expressed interest in a follow-up event to cover related issues like food processing, business planning, healthy food investment opportunities, and more. While much work lies ahead, this convening celebrated successes thus far and infused the community of practice with more knowledge. Importantly, it also started a new conversation on how food hubs can improve equity and opportunity not just for the producers they work with, but for the communities and customers they serve.
Introduction

Food Hubs 101, held on October 22, 2013 at the National 4-H Youth Conference Center in Chevy Chase, MD brought together a cross-section of food hubs, grantmakers, local and federal government representatives, and nonprofit organizations from the Greater Washington region. Attendees were united in their interest in understanding the role that food hubs can play in building the region’s food system. The Washington Regional Convergence Partnership (WRCP), a group of funders belonging to the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers (WRAG), hosted this day-long event.

As WRAG’s President, Tamara Copeland noted in her opening remarks, the WRCP knows that there has been tremendous growth in food hubs and that there are also some major nonprofit organizations that have performed food hub-like functions in the region for years. But there is not a lot of information on food hubs’ impact and they are also by and large, new entities to the funding community in the Greater Washington region. Given the WRCP’s interest in seeing more coordination in the local food system, the group thought it would be important to hold the convening as a window into some of the current opportunities and challenges for building a regional supply chain in a way that considers values around equity and inclusion.

The group’s consultant, Lindsay Smith, further noted that the growing interest in the Greater Washington region’s food system is reflective of the broader national movement to develop more sustainable, regional food systems. She shared that the WRCP is further committed to bringing an “equity lens” to their work to promote the development of a food system that is as inclusive and equitable as possible in all stages from land to fork. Given the persistence of inequities along lines of race, class, and more in the Greater Washington region, and the changing face of the region and the nation, this lens is critical.

The day’s panels and presentations focused primarily on the distribution phase of a more equitable food system; exploring what trends, success stories, and challenges are emerging in the food hubs that make such distribution of local and regional food possible.
Food Hubs 101

Presenters: John Fisk, Wallace Center and Jim Barham, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

John Fisk, Executive Director of the Wallace Center, and Jim Barham, agricultural economist at the Agriculture and Marketing Service agency of the USDA, provided an overview of food hubs and their current state of practice. Barham started by reminding the audience that buyer demand for local food continues to grow. Demand is currently outstripping available supply and producers still face a myriad of obstacles to accessing larger volume customers, including a lack of distribution, marketing, and processing infrastructure. This particularly stymies operators of mid-sized farms, known as “ag of the middle,” which are too large to sell directly to individual consumers but too small to be viable by selling to larger commodity markets. Enter: food hubs.

A regional food hub is a business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand. The presenters likened food hub functionality to an hourglass: products are aggregated from many farms and are then sold or otherwise re-distributed to a variety of outlets. Though this sounds similar to a conventional distribution system, food hubs provide a number of distinguishing services to producers. They also provide a range of community services including educational programs, buy local campaigns, healthy food distribution to communities considered food deserts, food bank donations, and more. Food hubs aim to be financially viable and to have positive economic, social, and environmental impacts within their communities.

Recent national growth in the number of food hubs is substantial. Based on a working list of 239 food hubs identified by the Wallace Center’s National Good Food Network (NGFN), at least 120 of these have launched in the past five years. Food hubs have developed under different legal structures, including privately held, nonprofit, cooperative, and publicly held. Though 48% of food hubs are self-identified as privately held businesses, they all have a social mission for their work and aim to support their community in some way.

Fisk also shared results from NGFN’s 2013 food hub survey which collected data from 2012. Of the 239 food hubs located around the country, NGFN found 21 active food hubs that serve the Greater Washington DC region with an additional 14 hubs in the process of emerging across DC, Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware.
Total annual sales by hubs in this region alone are estimated to be between $20 and $40 million. They have a diversity of products, models, and customers. Fifty-seven percent of active hubs in the region mostly sell directly to customers through online ordering systems, multi-farm CSAs, public markets, storefronts, etc.; 29% of the active food hubs sell wholesale to institutions such as schools, restaurants, hospitals, other distributors, grocery stores, etc.; and the other 14% sell to both wholesale and retail markets.

Nationally, the more than 100 food hubs that completed the 2013 survey reported buying from an average of 80 producers. Food hubs themselves were found to employ 11 staff members on average. Seventy-six percent reported that all or most of their producers were small and mid-sized. Half of the respondents indicated that most or all of their producers had diversified their product offerings. They have also extended their growing seasons, adopted more sustainable production methods, increased financial literacy, hired additional people, and increased acreage under production. In short, food hubs are actively providing value to small and mid-sized producers and helping to grow their

### BUYER DEMAND IS STRONG FOR LOCAL FOOD

- Local food sales were estimated to be $4.8 billion in 2008, and are projected to have climbed to $7 billion in 2012 (USDA-ERS report, 2012)
- In 2011 National Grocers Association survey, 83 percent consumers said the presence of local food “very” or “somewhat important” in their choice of food store (up from 79 percent in 2009)
- 89 percent of fine dining restaurants surveyed by the National Restaurant Association in 2008 reported serving locally sourced items
- Seven of the top 10 food retail chains in US now promote local sourcing (USDA-ERS report)
- The number of farm to school programs totaled more than 2,000 in 2011, a five-fold increase since 2004 (National Farm to School Network estimates)
operations, which in turn positively impacts the local economy.

Understanding food hub finances was a significant portion of the national survey. The business efficiency ratio was calculated by dividing an organization’s expenses by its revenue; a ratio of less than one indicates better performance than a ratio of greater than one. Although there was a wide range of results within each type of hub, nonprofit food hubs were found to have an average business efficiency ratio of 1.2. Cooperatives had a ratio of 0.94, and for-profits, 1.06. When asked how dependent they were on grant funding from public and/or private sources to carry out core functions, 51% of food hubs indicated that they were not dependent at all. Another 32% stated that they were somewhat dependent, meaning that 83% of existing food hubs could run their core operations for some period of time without external funding.

An audience question probed further the ability of nonprofit food hubs to operate without grant support, wondering whether successful food hubs may be bought out by bigger supply chains. Fisk and Barham responded that rather than being acquired by large corporate interests, food hubs may buy out each other. For example, the Charlottesville, VA-based Relay Foods acquired the local food buying club Arganica and its accompanying DC market. Relay Foods now has a strong presence in the city.

Regardless of structure, top food hub operational challenges include managing growth and balancing supply and demand. Food hubs identify the following as specific barriers to meeting the growing demand for local food: increasing staff, securing more product supply, and increasing storage space and delivery capacity. Despite its popularity, the food hub business model still contains risks. The vagaries of weather will never disappear, nor will the food industry’s tight profit margins. Cash flow may also be a challenge for food hubs, especially when they work with institutions that delay payments which the hub may not have an ability to advance to producers. Despite these challenges, all across the country, food hubs are expanding farm sales and showing other positive impacts on local economies. According to a Cornell University study, food hubs have an economic multiplier of 1.63: for every additional $1 of demand for food hub products, an additional $0.63 is generated in related industrial sectors.
Fisk concluded the presentation with a discussion of the role funders can play in supporting food hubs. He noted that it is important for those who are considering investing to look at what feasibility studies, business plans, and business background a potential food hub can demonstrate. Funders should also consider the food hub’s capacity to grow and its impact on the local economy.

More information from the survey referenced in this session is at: www.wallacecenter.org/foodhubcollaboration/

*The full presentation for this session is available in the Appendix.*
Panel Presentation: Additional Ways Food Hubs Seek to Improve Equity in the Food System

Moderator: Lorette Picciano, Rural Coalition
Panelists: Haile Johnston, Common Market; Kristin Suokko, Local Food Hub; Lindsay Palmer, DC Central Kitchen

This panel explored themes of equity and inclusion as they relate to food hubs through three case studies: Common Market (Philadelphia, PA), The Local Food Hub (Charlottesville, VA), and DC Central Kitchen (Washington, DC). As discussed in the day’s first presentation, food hubs are committed to providing community services in addition to standard aggregation and distribution services and improving equity for farmers. The purpose of this panel was to explore ways that food hubs can be further leveraged to improve the health of the communities they serve.

Moderator Lorette Picciano kicked off the panel by sharing some of the Rural Coalition’s experiences in working with socially disadvantaged producers across the country. Picciano stated that it is important to measure and evaluate how communities of color and other minorities are, or could be, involved in food hubs in the future. When examining who lacks access to food, oftentimes we see that members of communities of the same demographic groups could be supported to provide culturally appropriate food to these hubs. It is also important to take stock of who is engaged in running food hubs.

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- Lorette Picciano, Rural Coalition

Haile Johnston, a co-Executive Director of Common Market in Philadelphia, explained that the inspiration for his food hub came about from urban agriculture programming in Philadelphia’s Strawberry Mansion neighborhood, a largely low-income, African American community. After Johnston and his wife realized that the nature of this work could take a generation to effect behavior change, they started Common Market as a shorter term solution to improving food and health. Common Market is a nonprofit local food distributor that works to ensure all people in the region have access to good food while paying their producers and employees a fair wage.
They focus on wholesale and institutional food service channels; moving the majority of their products into hospitals, schools, and supermarkets. (This includes supermarkets that receive fresh food financing to reduce the prevalence of food deserts.)

Common Market considers community and local investment to be the primary driver of their work, which is why their theory of change focuses on ensuring all income levels have equal access to the local, healthy food market. Ultimately, Common Market keeps money in the local economy which supports regional farms and employs local people. They also focus on environmental stewardship and food safety. Agriculture is historically one of the more polluting environmental industries, but in their minds, it is possible for this paradigm to change too. Finally, they understand that if initiatives like Common Market are to be scaled and replicated, they need to provide safe and trusted products to be competitive with conventional agriculture, processing, and distribution.

The Local Food Hub (LFH) in Charlottesville, VA is another example of a young food hub that has had significant success since launching in July 2009 with the help of many community members. According to Executive Director, Kristin Suokko, LFH garnered broad support from the outset due to their goals for community building and inclusiveness. LFH envisions changing the food system so that local food is the norm, not the exception, for all community members. Everyone should always have the ability to choose local first, and from producers who are able to make a living. LFH has built relationships with their 80 plus partner producers by demonstrating that they will pay them a fair market price and on time. The vast majority of their partner producers are quite small, and in fact, many would be under the poverty level if they relied solely on their farm income. Over time these small growers have been able to increase their sales and their business, especially since LFH provides them with a whole suite of services, including food safety training, financial planning, packing workshops, and more. LFH has also partnered with the International Refugee Committee (IRC) on a farm worker training program. The program provides refugees with training and job placement on-site at LFH’s 70-acre certified organic educational farm. Many producers in central Virginia have identified growing the workforce of skilled farm laborers as a need.

Similar to Common Market, LFH works with institutions to get local food to community members. LFH has tripled the number of schools they work with since their launch, many of them rural with high numbers of low income students. LFH also donates food to organizations supporting underserved members of the Charlottesville community. Suokko argued that food access is the best lens through which to look at the food system and understand a whole host of social and economic issues that follow. Every benefit – for farmers, for the environment, for public health – that comes from a robust local food system is more fully realized when it penetrates the entire community.
The final panel presenter was Lindsay Palmer, the Director of Nutrition and Community Outreach for DC Central Kitchen (DCCK). Palmer introduced DCCK’s sweeping mission to the audience: to use food as a tool to strengthen bodies, empower minds, and build communities.

DCCK does this through a variety of programs, including job training, food recycling, and social enterprise. They are a well-established nonprofit that understands the needs of different communities in DC, including the deep disparities between the most affluent and most impoverished city wards. With a good transportation system in place, food processing and storage capacity, and existing procurement partnerships, DCCK has worked with the city government on a Healthy Corner Stores program to improve healthy food access within urban food deserts. Consumers and participating Healthy Corner Store owners have attested positively to the difference that the program is making for them. This program also employs graduates from DCCK’s culinary arts program, an initiative to address one of the root causes of food insecurity: poverty.

DCCK purchases local food for some of their programs to not only support regional farmers, but also because they are able to procure “seconds” (blemished or otherwise unaesthetically pleasing fruits and vegetables that high-end retailers won’t purchase) at a cheaper rate, stretching their purchasing dollars. This provides farmers with income from food that they may have otherwise had to dispose of.

When an audience member asked Palmer whether local food was going to remain an interest for DCCK for the foreseeable future, she responded that they turned to this because their supplier was charging quite a bit for (non-local) food. They found competitive pricing in local food, and particularly in local seconds. LHF’s Suokko added that from her perspective, the economic and public health benefits may take some time to come to fruition, but if food hubs and other organizations can document these benefits and demonstrate how they are contributing to positive change, the local food movement will be here to stay. Johnston

### The Problem

**District of Columbia, one out of eight households is considered food insecure. The disparities are much starker when comparing specific Wards. The Healthy Corner Stores program is one way that the city is seeking to address unequal access to healthy food.**

**Ward 3**
- Median Income: $128K
- Obesity Rate: 48%
- Type 2 Diabetes: 8%
- African American: 6%
- SNAP Recipients: 528
- Number of Grocery Stores: 11
- 1 grocery store per 7,300 residents

**Ward 8**
- Median Income: $29K
- Obesity Rate: 72%
- Type 2 Diabetes: 18%
- African American: 92%
- SNAP Recipients: 43,000
- Number of Grocery Stores: 3
- 1 grocery store per 23,000 residents

Throughout the entire District of Columbia, one out of eight households is considered food insecure. The disparities are much starker when comparing specific Wards. The Healthy Corner Stores program is one way that the city is seeking to address unequal access to healthy food.
agreed. Their original urban agriculture programs are still thriving and Common Market has grown to where they are successfully covering their operating costs with proceeds from their local food sales.

Another audience question pertained to the perceived trendiness of health and sustainability amongst funding communities, and how these issues may be more successfully connected to community building in order to ensure lasting support. Palmer noted that improving food access is going to be a long term project but that DCCK is exploring partnership opportunities to gather quantifiable data which they hope will reflect a community’s changing health profile as a result of increased healthy food access. Johnston responded that Common Market is actively figuring out how to democratize good food, or to make good food available to all members of a community. This includes seeking community partners to help them creatively address this issue. Faith communities, with their facilities and strong leadership, are emerging as places where Common Market believes they can help facilitate some of the biggest cultural shifts around food.

Before the panel came to a close, Picciano talked about the Rural Coalition’s work to build relationships with minority and disadvantaged farmers to ensure inclusion within policy efforts like the Farm Bill. She likened their work to sometimes feeling as though you have a toolbox, but are only permitted to use one tool at a time. To be the most successful, you need opportunities to use all of the tools in tandem: community food security, healthy food financing, outreach programs for financially disadvantaged farmers, and more. The stakeholders in the sustainable food movement can use the local political process to their advantage by getting directly involved. Picciano shared an example of three farmworkers in Florida recently running for county council; two were elected.

In their closing remarks, each panelist emphasized that their work was about building relationships and partnerships. This makes the work both challenging and gratifying, and hopefully of interest to funders. They noted that there’s a tremendous amount of creativity happening within the foundation world right now, transcending traditional hunger relief initiatives to consider social enterprise opportunities as well. Food hubs need a diversity of financial tools to enable them to survive and thrive, and foundations can play a key role in facilitating this.

Presentations for this session are available in the Appendix.
The day’s final panel provided an opportunity to hear more about some of the innovative, cross-sector work taking place in Greater Washington to build a sustainable regional food system. Moderator Philip Gottwals, an agricultural economist by training and food hub co-founder, introduced the panel by explaining that the goal of food hubs is to bring an element of transparency back into the food system. The food and agricultural sector is difficult: profit margins have never been thinner, and therefore private funder interest in this shifting paradigm is very important. He expressed hope that we will begin to see more investment in the new system, and that existing programs will work together more effectively so that funding can go farther.

Amanda Behrens, manager of the Maryland Food System Map at the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF), discussed data of interest to food hubs and their supporters. Initially the focus of the food system map was only on Baltimore food deserts. Instead of just encouraging grocery stores to enter these areas, CLF found a broader desire to include local food solutions in the effort to improve food access. As a result, the project expanded beyond the city. Maryland is an agricultural producer, but grain and poultry predominate. Many of the smaller farms growing food for human consumption are already at selling capacity via farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture programs. The Maryland Food System Map identified a need for farms in the state to produce more food to fill this gap.

Louise Mitchell discussed encouraging healthy, sustainable food procurement in health care settings as part of MD Hospitals for a Healthy Environment to benefit both patients and their surrounding communities. Many hospitals contract with food service corporations, whose existing infrastructure makes it difficult to purchase from local sources, and also to identify and publicize the local food that does make its way into these institutions. Hospitals have some financial incentives in place to buy from large purchasing organizations; however, some hospitals forego those incentives and instead purchase from food hubs or directly from local farmers.

Jody Tick described Capital Area Food Bank’s (CAFB) work as hub-like, given the distribution and aggregation nature of their operation. In the long-term they want to transition from emergency food assistance to community food assistance. Today they operate out of two facilities in DC and Northern Virginia and distribute millions of pounds of food annually, some of it sourced from the region. CAFB is a trusted source for food. They complement distribution services to hundreds of partner agencies with nutrition education for clients at risk of hunger across the metro area. CAFB is launching the Food and Vegetable Fund for Greater Washington, a program that will enable CAFB to source more fresh produce locally. Tick shared that fresh foods require a greater degree of logistical support than the canned or dry goods that may be more common in a food bank setting.
Matt Mulder from the non-profit Arcadia Center for Sustainable Food and Agriculture explained that his organization is addressing food systems work in an entrepreneurial way. The nonprofit aims to build a more equitable and sustainable food system by engaging every element of the system, from producers all the way to the consumers. Arcadia has a demonstration farm at the nearby Woodlawn Plantation in Alexandria, VA. Their farm and nutrition education programming includes field trips, workshops, and demonstrations. Arcadia also provides healthy food access through its mobile market program. Their retrofitted school bus procures food from local farms and sells it at nine sites throughout Greater Washington that have been identified for their lack of grocery stores and farmers markets. The mobile market hosts a double bucks program that is changing purchasing habits amongst the low income consumers the market serves. For example, rather than spending just $20 if they have $10 and a $10 double bucks match, customers are spending approximately $24 on local food.

The last panelist was Tom McDougall of Blue Ridge Produce. Their tag line is “we let farmers be farmers.” The current food system makes it difficult to buy local at scale, but organizations like Blue Ridge Produce are changing that paradigm and are working on logistics on the farmers’ behalf. According to McDougall, in Virginia, $16.8 billion of food is purchased each year, and seven to eight percent of that is local food. Blue Ridge Produce is aiming to increase the market share by 1%. They’re doing this as a for-profit business pursuing b corp certification as one demonstration of their commitment to community. Blue Ridge Produce is also exploring corporate CSA models, veteran farm training programs, and more in order to capture that additional market share. One hundred percent of their partner producers returned to work with them for year two, and twenty-two percent of those original producers have grown their own operations. McDougall believes there is still a big gap between supply and demand, and an enormous untapped market for local food.
Closing Thoughts
Philip Gottwals; Lorette Picciano; Arthur Neale, USDA; Jim Barham; John Fisk; Kristin Pauly, Prince Charitable Trusts

The day’s moderators and morning presenters concluded the event with some summary observations. Philip Gottwals reminded the audience that it is time to think about systemic changes. And while metrics are supremely important, the local food movement must be driven by a different set of metrics that aren’t just cost and financially based.

In the same vein, Lorette Picciano invited the audience to think about the cost of inequity, citing the social and economic costs of decades-long farmer discrimination cases. She urged metrics that would capture more fully who is participating in building regional food systems and observed that local food and equity groups are not necessarily supporting each other to their full potential. Instead of an “either/or” approach, this movement needs a “both/and” approach.

Arthur Neale signaled his strong support of food hubs on behalf of USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Services. They are keen to see more markets become available for farmers within the growing local food movement. Their role is to provide support through research and data collection. In a young movement like this one, there’s not enough data available at this time for lawmakers to make assessments and create policy. This will be an ongoing effort.

John Fisk of the Wallace Center urged the audience to think of the sustainable food movement as a culmination of longstanding interests, including environment, health, and farm viability. The globalization, consolidation, and lack of transparency in the food system is relatively recent, having emerged with cheap oil. This will ultimately be the short-lived. The work of people gathered for this convening and beyond to refocus the food system on health for people, the environment and for communities is already undoing this 70 year “blip.” As stakeholders dismantle that movement, they will have to do so in an equitable fashion, ensuring that jobs are held and controlled equitably, and that infrastructure is built and controlled in the same fashion. The Wallace Center just completed a multi-year project that made 30 grants to organizations increasing healthy urban food access with equity and inclusiveness at the forefront of this.

Kristin Pauly of the Prince Charitable Trusts closed the session by adding that today’s convening demonstrated the extraordinary potential for multiple benefits to result from local and regional food systems work. Funders have the important job of making money and resources available to people in the field effecting change, and in the case of the sustainable food movement, there are opportunities for funders to collaborate and coordinate as a unified force in doing so.

“Federal and state agencies are good at funding hard infrastructure, but not the intangible work like relationship building and network creation that really drives the success of this movement. This is where foundations play a role.”
-Jim Barham, USDA agricultural economist
Conclusion

If the engaged audience and dynamic panelists, enthusiastic networking, and positive feedback after the event are indicators, Food Hubs 101 was an unmistakable success. Attendees overwhelmingly expressed interest in convening again, citing “valuable connections,” the “notion of approaching the topic as business driven by economics,” and the “diverse assortment of organizations” represented as event highlights.

Attendees also had positive remarks on how considerations of equity were incorporated into the day. One remarked that the topic was “very well covered; the best I’ve heard to date” while another said “I am interested in incorporating the homeless and physically disabled;” raising the point that equity was focused primarily on race and socio-economic factors at the event.

Several questions came up during a brief brainstorming session that could be addressed at a future gathering, including:

- How can governments (local, state) remove barriers to better facilitate food hub launches?
- What technical assistance can community development financial institutions (CDFI) provide to owners and operators of food hubs?
- What challenges have food hubs overcome to get food directly into schools?
- How can nonprofit food hubs make money in order to subsidize their other operations?
- What additional metrics are needed to measure food hub successes?
- How do existing and emerging food hubs address food safety?

Finally, Haile Johnston from Common Market offered another observation that could be used to focus a future conversation on building food system infrastructure and the local economy from an equity-centered perspective. Johnston remarked that plenty of investors have approached Common Market with financing offers; however, there is tremendous work to be done in getting organizations and their staff to the point where they are “socially investable.”

The event attendees are to be commended for the significant strides their organizations have already made in cultivating a healthy food system for the Greater Washington region. An interdisciplinary approach will continue to be needed as nonprofits, businesses, foundations, and government alike all work towards their vision of a transparent, equitable, and sustainable food from farm to fork.
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About the Washington Regional Convergence Partnership

The Washington Regional Convergence Partnership (WRCP) was formally established in 2011 through a planning grant from the Convergence Partnership. The group is a collective of local funders who have made investments in our food system for many years and belong to the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers. They envision an equitable regional food system that ensures food security and decreased chronic disease, access to affordable and nutritious food for all, aligned investments among the philanthropic community that promote equity in the food system, and increased investment in the local and sustainable food economy.