

Developing a community-based local food system in Will County, Illinois: Insights from stakeholders' viewpoints

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Abstract

The interest in and enthusiasm for shifting food systems to community-based and local trajectories have increased exponentially over the past decade. Part of the appeal of community-based local food systems is their potential to secure access to healthy food for local communities, expand sustainable farming practices, promote local food economies, and advance environmental and food justice. Interactions and collaborations within the spectrum of the food system's stakeholders—from farmers to local officials and organizations to local businesses

and residents—are the cornerstone for effective food systems tailored to their community's needs. An increasing number of food system studies have applied stakeholder assessment approaches to map out complex situations among multiple stakeholder groups with different values and viewpoints regarding food system change. However, despite being an essential and influential political unit to target, counties have received very little attention in food system studies, as researchers and practitioners often focus on the federal and state levels of intervention to design food policies.

This study examined the food system in Will County, Illinois, by applying the advocacy coalition framework and using a qualitative, semi-structured survey to engage a diverse set of stakeholders. The answers to the survey questions offered insights into three overlapping and divergent Will County stakeholder viewpoints (Pragmatic, Environmental and Food Justice Advocate, and Visionary), with the intent of informing and enacting food system

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transformation at the county level. The discussion within this paper focuses on coalition-building and collaboration between formal and informal groups to empower local communities to develop a distinctive food system identity that promotes community support, collaborative networks, and food justice at the county level.

Keywords

Advocacy Coalition Framework, Food Justice, County Food Planning, Stakeholders Assessment, Community Building, Urban Agriculture

Introduction

Driven by economic globalization and managed by highly concentrated corporations structurally and spatially, conventional food systems are increasingly criticized for their harmful environmental impact (Fan, 2021) and the economic and social problems they create in rural America (Cleveland et al., 2015). In this context, local food movements, networks, and enterprises are emerging as a “second generation” of food movements that promote reintegrating sustainable modes of production, securing community access to healthy food, and developing viable local food economies (Chojnacki & Creamer, 2019; Feenstra, 1997; Gupta et al., 2018; Sonnino et al., 2019). Across the United States, an increasing number of stakeholders (e.g., farmers, food security advocates, public health departments, planning departments, economic development officials, community groups, educators, local businesses, county managers, nongovernmental associations, and schools) have developed a common language about agri-food issues and are working together to implement and develop local food systems geared towards their community’s needs (Bloom et al., 2020; Cleveland et al., 2015; Low et al., 2015; Soper, 2021).

Establishing an effective local and community-based food system does not depend solely on the availability of farmers who grow local produce to meet consumer demands. Many rural and urban farmers believe that their contributions go beyond securing access to healthy food and encompass the much-needed community and economic development, as well as ecological and environmental protection. Unfortunately, their call for support from

local government and community-development corporations can go unheard (Kaufman, 2007). There are three reasons why most local policies are not oriented more explicitly towards community-based local food systems. First, the conceptualization of a local food system consisting of complex chains of activities from production to consumption (farm to table)—including processing, retailing, food waste management, and other numerous food changes (Ericksen, 2008)—is very complex in its scope, scale, stakeholders, and goals, and therefore, challenging to manage. Second, for local food systems to evolve and expand into community-based food systems, coalition networks and multi-stakeholder governance formed by concerted actions are crucial (Chojnacki & Creamer, 2019) but challenging to establish in a background full of ambiguity and differences. Finally, the tensions and conflicts, based on differences in scale, power, values, or conflicting value frames, still characterize the stakeholders in the dominant, industrialized agri-food system and continuously create a disconnect between community interests and local government policies (Lobao & Stofferahn, 2008). Shifting conventional food systems, which are inherently global and connected by complex webs of information, goods, services, and capital, to local trajectories is primarily a challenge for governance (Garcia-Gonzalez & Eakin, 2019). As Ostrom (2011) puts it, governance can be defined by stakeholders (e.g., actors and organizations) who manage resources and establish clear guidelines and management rules before putting them into practice. Governance not only relies on institutions with their rules and standards but includes all the involved stakeholders, along with their values, actions, and viewpoints.

Many authors cite the efficacy of stakeholder assessments in mapping complex situations with multiple stakeholder groups to provide insights into the stakeholders’ values and viewpoints (Campbell & Rampold, 2021; Garcia-Gonzalez & Eakin, 2019; O’Brien & Denckla Cobb, 2012; Saint Ville et al., 2017; Sanyé-Mengual et al., 2016; van den Hove, 2006). This approach explains the responsibilities of organizations and individuals who play significant roles within the system (Reed et al., 2009). It also enhances participation and clar-

ity in terms of visions and priorities and brings to light potential areas of conflict that may hinder policy implementation (Timotijevic et al., 2019). Furthermore, for many, a stakeholder assessment approach plays a significant role in encouraging food policy change (Aligica, 2006; Bryson, 2004; Saint Ville et al., 2017) and overcoming the obstacles faced by collaborative governance arrangements and local food networks (Benson et al., 2012).

As it may be observed in the United States, stakeholder assessments help frame winning coalitions that address local, regional, and state food systems priorities through structures, such as food policy councils (FPCs) (Gibbons et al., 2020). These councils reflect the significant role of partnerships and collaborations by backing initiatives for local food processes supported by grassroots efforts, commercial actors in the food chains, and local or state governments (Koski et al., 2016). A growing body of studies highlights the role of these councils in promoting many values related to local food systems, such as securing community access to nutritious food, promoting healthy eating, and preventing diet-related chronic diseases (Harper et al., 2009; Lange et al., 2020).

Despite the increasing use of stakeholder assessments in studies on the transition towards localism in food systems (Bassarab et al., 2019; Benson et al., 2012; Cumming et al., 2019; Freedgood et al., 2011; Garcia-Gonzalez & Eakin, 2019; Gupta et al., 2018; Hammelman et al., 2020; Kaufman, 2007), there are few detailed studies on specific programs or policies developed at the county level (Low et al., 2015; Walsh et al., 2015). This paper aims to bridge this gap by examining the perspectives and viewpoints of stakeholders about establishing a local food system in Will County (Illinois), which is located in the vicinity of the third-largest city in the United States, Chicago, with agriculture and the food industry being the primary local economic development drivers in the area.

Will County is a relevant choice for a case study because even if the demand for sustainable food systems is widespread throughout Illinois, the county faces several specific divergent food system challenges, such as rapid urbanization leading to a

decline in farmland, increased residential demand for local produce, and a pressing need to address food insecurity and disparities in food access.

This paper is a collaboration with Lewis University, which is in Will County. It seeks to strengthen the research framework on stakeholder participation in establishing a sustainable, community-based local food system by engaging Will County stakeholders collaboratively. There were no established formal processes around these issues when this research was performed. Still, a small group within the food system has emerged (e.g., environmental educators, activists, local farmers, and food bank managers) and sought support to change the current food policy and organization by engaging local communities.

This research aims to identify which stakeholders are involved in Will County's food system and assess their engagement, opinions, and interests in promoting a shift to a more localized and community-based food system. To this end, we built upon Paul Sabatier's (1988) advocacy coalition framework (ACF), an evidence-based framework focusing on stakeholder values, beliefs, and positions to understand their viewpoints and involvement. The methodology is based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews to understand and deconstruct stakeholder viewpoints concerning their positions and responsibilities in the current food system. This approach will identify who should participate in achieving Will County's food system transformation and inform collaborative actions among them. The discussion within this paper focuses on coalition building and collaboration between formal and informal groups to empower local communities to develop a distinctive identity for a community-based local food system that promotes sustainability, viable local food economies, social equity, and food justice in Will County.

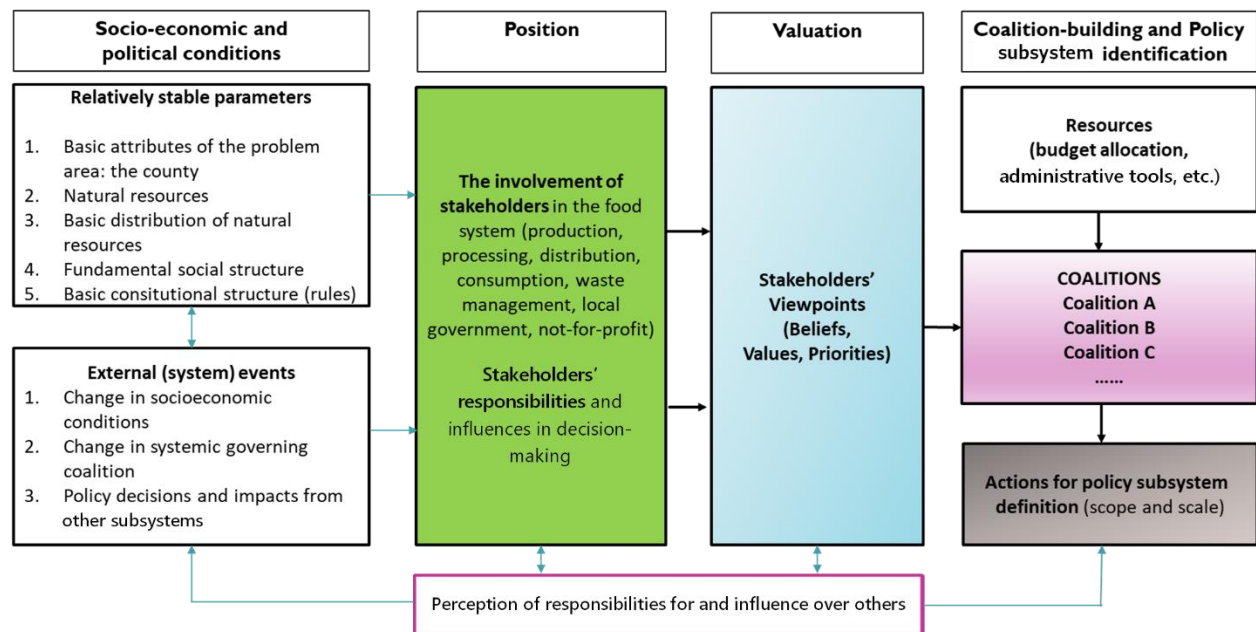
Conceptual Framework: The Advocacy Coalition Framework

A growing body of stakeholder assessment studies has used frameworks drawn from earlier works of policy scientists concerned with the distribution of power and the role of interest groups in the decision-making and policy processes (Dowding, 2019; Ostrom, 2011). In particular, Sabatier (1988) made

an essential contribution to this field through the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), which was initially developed to address “wicked” problems (e.g., economic, environmental, and political). These problems have the peculiarity of being the subject of substantial conflicts that require multiple actors from several levels of government to change their mindsets and behaviors to find solutions (Pierce et al., 2017; Weible et al., 2011; Weible & Sabatier, 2009). The ACF suggests that stakeholders form partnerships to influence policy processes through belief systems, which translate into values and viewpoints (Weible et al., 2011) influenced by their positions and responsibilities (Pierce et al., 2017). Weible and Sabatier (2009) underscore that although stakeholder viewpoints are affected by external factors, such as socioeconomic and political conditions (see Figure 1), possible coalitions will tend to evolve into an ongoing process of search and adaptation motivated by a desire to achieve policy goals. Hence, the framework tends to identify stakeholders who share a specific set of viewpoints guiding their actions (Dowding, 2019)

and are most likely to be key players in specific policy subsystems¹. Environmental, energy, water, and food policies exemplify policy subsystems that include interactive networks of interest groups, beneficiaries, and agencies involving many levels of government and nongovernment policy actors. By focusing on shared actions and institutional development, the ACF is useful to study stakeholder viewpoints towards developing local and community-based food systems. It informs more coordinated efforts (e.g., food policy coalitions) that support food system initiatives to address the connections between human and ecological systems, social justice, community health, and democracy enhancing initiatives, particularly when these systems emerge via grassroots initiatives that may have connections with the government. Garcia-Gonzalez and Eakin (2019) emphasized the usefulness of the ACF framework in allowing stakeholders to reflect on their interests and capacities within the food system before planning any efforts to build consensus and take collective actions in the Phoenix Metropolitan area food system. Moreover, Clark (2018)

Figure 1. An Adaptation of the Diagram of the Advocacy Coalition Framework



Adapted from Weible and Sabatier, 2009, and Garnett, 2014.

¹ These actors may include those from the private sector, nonprofits, academia, consulting firms, the news media, engaged citizens, and possibly others (Weible & Sabatier, 2009).

provided evidence about the relevance of the ACF by showing how a civically oriented group in Franklin County, Ohio, transitioned into an advocacy coalition that shaped the county Food Council's mission, objectives, and political tasks, which resulted in a food policy agenda.

Method

Survey Design

The ACF was used as a theoretical framework in the questionnaire's design to understand stakeholder viewpoints comprehensively. Hence, the questionnaire asked stakeholders: (a) how do they define a community-based food system, (b) what roadblocks do they perceive in the current food system, (c) what are the essential values, in their opinion, of the current food system that need to be sustained, and (d) what are the critical first steps and actions to transition towards a community-based local food system in Will County.

The questions were followed by a mapping exercise consisting of open-ended questions about stakeholder perspectives on the essential steps to achieving a community-based local food system. Stakeholders were asked to share their opinions on the required changes in organizational conditions to build coalitions to coordinate interests not yet present in food policymaking at the county level. Participants answered questions such as, "According to you, who are the key decision-makers primarily responsible for enacting change in the food system of Will County?" and "In your opinion, who are the most important, or the key organizations to maintain a community-based local food system in Will County?" Additional conversations beyond the survey questions also informed the analysis and reporting within this study.

Stakeholders' Selection and Recruitment

The stakeholders recruited for this study were selected based on two theoretical considerations. The first is grounded in the policy sciences (Maxwell & Slater, 2003; Pelletier et al., 1999) and

emphasizes the need to give equal attention to the process as the product of any political change resulting from coalition-building between stakeholders. The second is rooted in community development studies (Bolles, 2019; Cumming et al., 2019; Kaufman, 2007; Mendes et al., 2011; Thilmann McFadden et al., 2016). It attempts to analyze food system stakeholders at a granular level and go beyond the binary vision of categorizing them as (a) those controlled by globalized industrial food systems or (b) those embodying the sustainable, alternative, and local food system. Overall, examining the effect of stakeholders' values, responsibilities, and sources of power related to food planning and policy formation is what these works have in common. The Will County Regional Sustainability Network, the Will County Habitat for Humanity, and the Will County Land Use Department² offered their assistance to identify 42 stakeholders actively operating within the food system with as many varied positions and responsibilities as possible. Not only did this provide a diverse sample, but it overcame some barriers to entry that can threaten qualitative research. A supplementary list was also generated from internet research. It included other actors who were deemed critical players in the process of community-based local food system planning and policy decision-making in Will County (e.g., the state health department, food banks, not-for-profit organizations, researchers, community garden leaders, etc.).

All the survey participants were categorized into groups based on their positions and areas of intervention within the food system (Table 1). Participants were contacted by email or phone, informed of the survey's purpose, and invited to participate. In the end, 33 face-to-face interviews of stakeholders were conducted from the summer of 2019 into early 2020 due to time constraints and resource limitations.

Data Analysis

The answers to the questionnaire were coded according to recurring themes emerging from the

² Specific actors within the same stakeholders' group (e.g., government offices) were identified as potentially having opposite perceptions. For instance, different offices can support or hinder the transition towards a local food system within agricultural service providers: a natural resource conservation service *versus* a farm service agency.

Table 1. Activities and Responsibilities of Survey Participants

Category	Number of Participants
Academics/Researchers	3
Health department representatives	2
Community building	3
Production/local farmers	6
Distribution	2
Processing	1
Waste management specialist	1
Food services - retailers	2
Nongovernmental organizations	3
Food Bank	1
Local administration representatives	3
Policy development specialists	3
Land conservation specialist	1
Economic development specialist	1
Farm Bureau representative	1
Total	33

data (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Through content analysis (Lune & Berg, 2017), a codebook of themes and subthemes was created based on the questionnaire. The 33 completed questionnaires revealed themes and statements related to five main dimensions of a community-based local food system, as discussed in the literature: (a) social justice, (b) environmental sustainability, (c) economic viability, (d) food supply healthiness, and (e) collaborative actions and networks. These dimensions reflect values that stakeholders routinely hold and typically correlate with their positions and responsibilities in the food system.

The stakeholder viewpoints were sorted into three main categories: (a) the **Pragmatic** viewpoint, which values the contributions of local food activities to Will County residents and focuses on the economic activities that the local food system must include (e.g., local food hubs, viable wages for food workers, and the requirements of adjusting existing regulatory instruments); (b) the **Environmental and Food Justice Advocate** viewpoint, which is concerned both with achieving environmental sustainability and improving fresh food availability, accessibility, and affordability in local communities (e.g., alleviate the food insecurity and food access disparities spreading throughout the county), and (c) the **Visionary** viewpoint, which is not only concerned about environmental,

social and economic contributions of the local food system to Will County’s communities, but strongly emphasizes the role of partnership and cooperation among stakeholders and local communities as an engine to foster food system transformation.

Results

This section includes a narrative description of stakeholder viewpoints revealed by the data analysis. Figure 2 offers a visual representation of stakeholders categorized according to their positions and responsibilities in the food system and in relation to the three viewpoints. We share additional information to show how stakeholders align their values and viewpoints with the goal of creating a community-based local food system in Will County. First, we review stakeholder definitions of a community-based local food system. Then, we share the perceived obstacles and central values that must be maintained in the current food system. Finally, we highlight comments related to the first actions to implement and the stakeholders to engage collaboratively to catalyze the transformation of Will County’s food system into a community-based local one.

Stakeholder Definitions of a Community-Based Local Food System

According to the respondents’ positions and responsibilities, a community-based local food system concept had different meanings. First, respondents with a pragmatic viewpoint ($n=12$, including local farmers, food distributors, processors and retailers, and a waste management specialist) frequently defined this system in terms of economic activities by listing the spectrum of food supply chain activities. Very few, except the waste management specialist and some local farmers, expressed concerns about the environment or referred to the local food system’s potential to achieve social justice goals as part of its definition.

A local food system is a group of tasks or actions that involve producing, moving, purchasing, and discarding food. It includes farmers, transportation, stores, farmers markets,

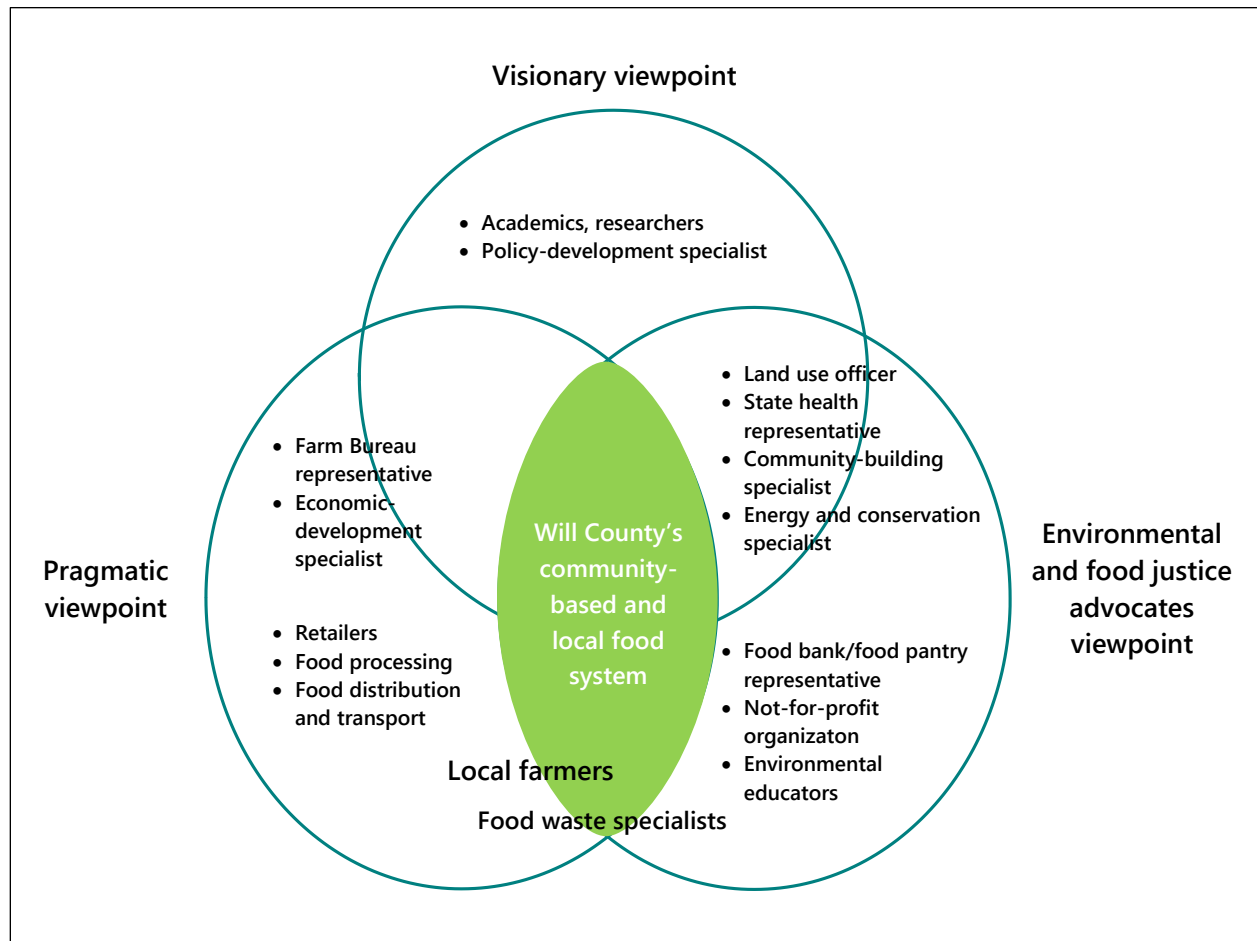
consumers, composting, and waste disposal.
 (Waste management specialist)

A local food system promotes food as an individual and community right. (Activist)

Second, stakeholders with an environmental and food justice advocate viewpoint ($n=7$, including activists, environmental educators, community-building specialists, and food bank managers) tended to characterize a community-based local food system mainly through its contribution to securing healthy and fresh food access for all. Activists underscored equity and justice in their definitions and called attention to the numerous ways in which socioeconomically disadvantaged groups are affected across Will County. According to these respondents, a community-based local food system primarily will help overcome poverty and racial disparities in the county and solve many inequalities throughout the food system.

Finally, in many ways, the idea of regional food systems correlates with community-based local food systems for respondents with a visionary viewpoint. Most of the respondents in this group ($n=15$, including academics, policy development officers, land use officers, health officers, a land conservation specialist, researchers, an economic development specialist, and community-building specialists) stressed the importance of networks and fostering collaboration between formal and informal groups to empower local communities in Will County. Thus, the food system is expected to play a prominent role in developing a county's distinctive identity by promoting sustainability,

Figure 2. Stakeholders Categorized According to their Viewpoints



healthy eating, viable economic activities, and social and food justice.

A community-based local food system is a desirable, functional, and progressive process that would develop distinctive food identities for local places. (Academic)

Other characteristics, such as edible landscapes, comprehensive planning strategies, creating space for alternative agriculture (e.g., organic agriculture, regenerative agriculture, and urban agriculture), securing wages for food workers, and reducing food miles, were frequently underscored in the visionaries' definitions of a community-based food system (Figure 3).

Perceived Roadblocks to Achieving a Community-Based Local Food System in Will County

It is not only the definition of a food system that matters but also how potential actors perceive the obstacles to overcome to enact a change. A prominent topic in the stakeholders' discourse (19 out of 33) was a shared concern about the impact of the industrialized history of agriculture in Illinois. Like most people in the United States, Will County residents obtain food from the mainstream food system (e.g., supermarkets, grocery stores, and restau-

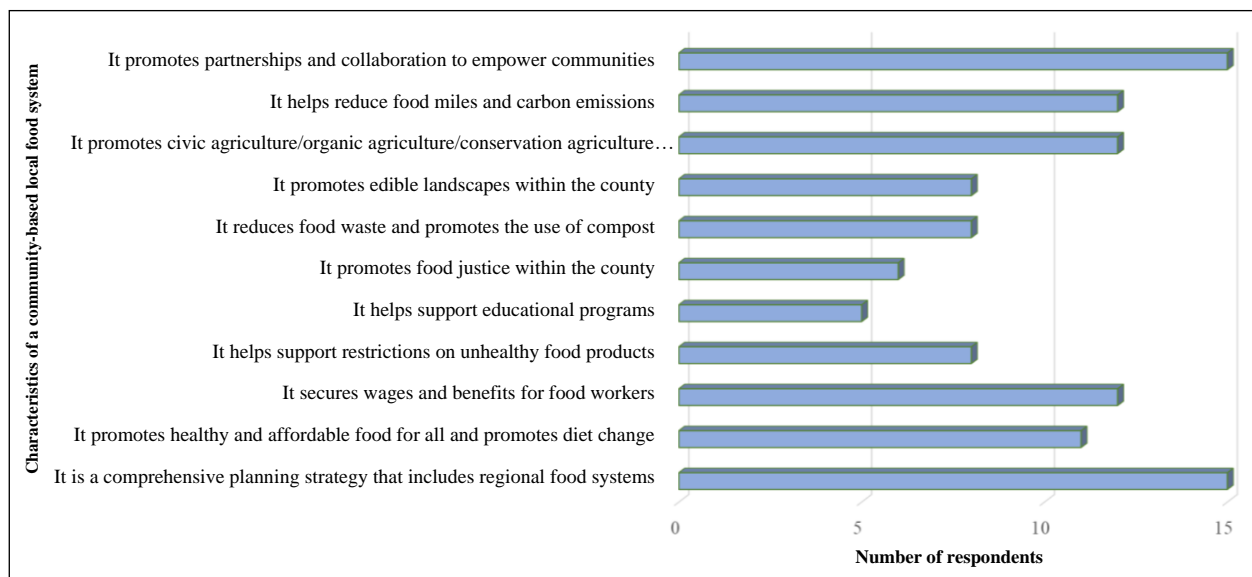
rants), typically from centralized and global distributors who buy from large-scale producers. This has resulted in production-oriented landscapes that neglect the cultural and ecological functions that agricultural activities have supported for a long time, leading to persistent environmental pollution issues. Overcoming a long history of industrialized farming practices is a must for Will County to build a sustainable community-based local food system.

Farmers are encouraged to specialize, not to diversify, which has led to the loss of the ecological diversity of farms and soil degradation. (Community building specialist)

Land use policy and the overall agricultural policy in Illinois favor large producers and processors promoting an export-oriented agri-food system. (Local farmer)

Other structural roadblocks emerged from conversations with small-scale, local farmers ($n=6$) who struggled to make a living in the conventional market. According to these farmers, scale issues, limited production capacities, profitability, the competitiveness of small-scale farms, and decreasing farmland acres in Will County were critical issues to address.

Figure 3. Community-Based Local Food System Characteristics According to Visionary Stakeholders



We are facing the dilemma of providing the right quantity and quality of products, and at the same time, maintaining decent living and wages, how could we match supply with large-scale demand? (Local farmer)

Local farmers also commented on the lack of knowledge of direct marketing, including direct sales to consumers through farmers markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA), and intermediated marketing channels, such as grocery sales, restaurants, and food hubs. Overall, they considered that “long-term viability hubs” have received very little attention from public policy.

In Will County, direct marketing approaches suffer from a lack of capacity both in terms of the volume of available products but also the required infrastructure to meet the growing demand for local and sustainable food. The most important obstacle to the local food system is the lack of economic, administrative, and physical arrangements of the most suitable scale for relocating locally grown food to local eaters. (Local farmer)

Another area of concern, according to local farmers, is the inflexibility of safety regulations. Indeed, the Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) standards profoundly impede the development of local food production and add further restrictions for growers in terms of possible pathways to consumers, trapping them in a “vicious cycle” (Figure 4).

We can apply for certifications to access new markets, but the process can be expensive and time-consuming. (Local farmer)

Urban agriculture emerged as a shared area of concern between stakeholders with an environmental and food justice advocate viewpoint (mainly activists, community-building specialists, environmental educators, and food bank managers) and those with a visionary viewpoint (land-use officials, energy, and land conservation specialists). Both acknowledge urban agriculture as part of the solution to the frequent shortages of fresh fruits

and vegetables in Will County. These shortages are caused and even exacerbated by the geographic position of the county near Chicago, one of the largest cities in the U.S., and Naperville, one of the Midwest’s wealthiest cities. Indeed, most of the fresh food produced in the county is transported to be sold in these cities. Although interstate highways contribute to manufacturing and distribution costs in the domestic market, they serve as essential socio-economic boundaries in Will County.

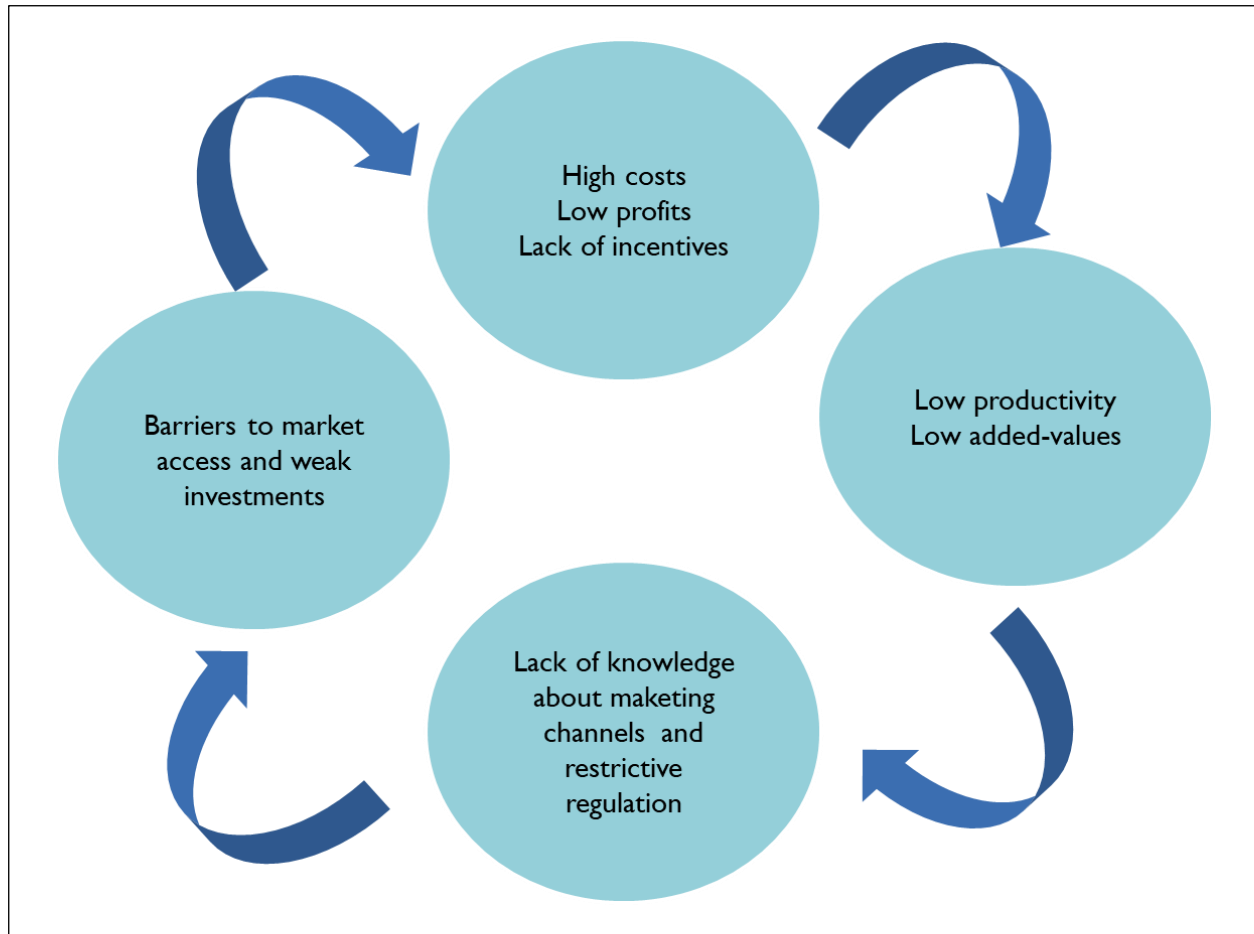
Will County is set up preferably to meet the demand of two large markets for locally grown food, Chicago and Naperville. Eastern Will County, where currently a large percentage of farms is located, has access to I-55. Western-Southern Will County has access to I-80. (Land use officer)

Will County is ill-equipped to integrate urban farming into its plans, and these activities are still to date overlooked. Land-use regulation and urban planning sought to separate incompatible land use in Will County, proactively eliminating the nuisances or negative externalities of agriculture from residential land to protect the population’s health and safety. Unfortunately, this accentuated the lack of secure tenure for urban growers and hindered urban agriculture development on a larger scale.

To date, the current land use policy tended to bypass or even ignore food that is grown within the county’s boundaries. (Community-building specialist)

Current land management authority has limited ordinances regarding growing the food outside of agriculturally zoned areas and did not anticipate how food access can impact on local economies as well as on the residents’ health. (Health department representative)

The opposition of urban planners to integrating urban farming further limits farmland availability, as food production functions compete with other more lucrative projects that provide higher profits for landowners, such as commercial development.

Figure 4. The “Vicious Cycle” of Will County’s Local Farmers

It is crucial to bring practical solutions to the land use issues that are imposed or perpetuated by the urban planning policy context. (Land use officer)

Finally, visionary stakeholders have pointed to the absence of collaborative spaces to deal with food issues and emphasized the pressing need to create a collaborative supply chain to market local food. The lack of intercounty partnerships was also cited as an obstacle by land-use and health department representatives and an economic development specialist. There are no established or emerging initiatives to foster local food system advancement across counties, despite several initiatives to build local food systems in nearby Cook County.

The food issue is such a compartmented issue while none of this should exist. Counties should find a way to work together. (Economic development specialist)

In other counties, individuals representing diverse sectors of the food system such as education, conventional and sustainable agriculture, health department, political and legal system representative are all together already at the table. (Land use representative)

Critical Values of the Current Food System in Will County

Even if the challenge of achieving a community-based food system in Will County may seem daunting, stakeholders acknowledged some current food system values that must be sustained and even

strengthened. Pragmatic stakeholders (e.g., local farmers, food retailers, processors, and transporters) underscored rising awareness of community-supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives as an option for accessing short supply chains. Furthermore, retailers and food transporters highlighted the current food system's capacity to provide year-round access to fresh vegetables and fruits and seasonal local produce as essential value to maintain.

Values expressed by environmental and food justice advocate stakeholders join those expressed by visionary stakeholders. Both pointed to the overall historical culture of farming in the United States as an essential value to maintain while widely expanding sustainable farming practices. Moreover, the growing enthusiasm for local food movements, and the connections created by the county's dynamic farmers market, are also perceived as crucial in linking consumers and producers through business and social relationships in Will County.

America is the land of opportunities and abundance with many food outlets, and business is delivering food via internet shopping. (Health department representative)

We are an agriculture-based country; we can keep the tradition of farming alive but go back to our roots versus big agriculture. (Activist)

Visionary stakeholders demonstrated a robust agricultural consciousness by acknowledging the significance of farmers in the local economy and communities. They perceived the farmland assessment in Illinois and lower-taxed farmland in Will County positively, in addition to being a value to sustain and an opportunity to seize.

Taxes are nice to pay for things like roads/bridges, needed government services, and employees' wages and benefits, but lower-taxed farmland makes Will County a unique place to live. We need to develop a sustainable local food system to help them understand why and how a local food system can and will be for the way for Will County to become a vibrant and diversified county instead of a county with more warehouses for Chinese

product distribution. (Economic development specialist)

First Steps to Initiate Planning a Community-Based Local Food System in Will County

Creating organizational and physical structures at appropriate scales for the local aggregation and distribution of food emerged from visionary (e.g., a land-use specialist and an economic development specialist) and pragmatic (e.g., local farmers and retailers) stakeholder responses as an immediate action to overcome the roadblocks of pooling food products from many small farms and delivering them to grocery stores, restaurants, hospitals, and schools throughout the county. In addition, environmental and food justice advocate stakeholders reinforced this argument. They stressed the importance of consolidating the local food production-consumption nexus by rebuilding and expanding existing farmers markets and developing viable markets in underserved neighborhoods. Mainly, activists and environmental educators advocated that the markets could tackle the food desert problem and empower people who live in those areas to create a more just place.

Many food deserts already exist in Will County; the primary challenge of the local food system is to feed those who are living in these areas. (Environmental educator)

Responses reflected a consensus among environmental and food justice advocates and visionary stakeholders on two significant steps to start planning in Will County. First, both emphasized the need to develop urban agriculture initiatives throughout the county, apart from existing school gardens. These initiatives enact structural change in building community food resources and developing "food citizens." Thus, urban agriculture is not only understood as a mere way of growing vegetables, but it also has potential for citizenship, learning, creativity, community, and social responsibility. Second, both acknowledged the importance of shifting responsibility to the regional level as a first step in planning a local food system. This would engage communities differently because the excitement and connections through

community engagement in the food system have to spill over to the regional level. Will County has to articulate a clear role for itself to achieve food system goals grounded in establishing strategic collaborative actions, promoting a combined agenda of food-access justice, and catalyzing sustainable agriculture.

Visionary stakeholders (a health department representative and a land-use officer) prioritized developing fruitful collaborations between not-for-profit and local government agencies, especially when such initiatives strengthened urban communities in other surrounding counties like Cook County.³ While local government agencies have responsibilities for nutrition, education, and school lunch programs, not-for-profit organizations, such as churches and food pantries, exemplify organizations that keep the emergency food network operating. Furthermore, most visionary stakeholders acknowledged the role of government support in creating new projects that link individual community members and businesses directly with local farmers to improve the local food economy. Others emphasized the necessity of addressing land availability, access, and usability by urban farmers. Finally, visionary and environmental and food justice advocate stakeholders and local farmers pointed to the importance of supporting the food system's social component through communication (e.g., campaigns to encourage the county's residents to buy local) and educational programs.

It is essential to educate the youth and strengthen their knowledge from where the food is coming from and the ways it affects their health. (Community building specialist)

The Most Important Organizations to Involve in a Will County Community-Based Local Food System

At this stage, the questionnaire aimed to understand the complex problems of governance, policy, and food system changes in Will County and identify the main actors involved. Most respondents

($n=18$) underscored the significant influence of political and corporate actors in triggering a fundamental change, as financial interests and corporate power dominate the current food system. These respondents shared a common belief that national politics must support new dynamics that resist corporate food-system control.

Although the Farm Bureau's historical role in promoting local farms and securing residents' access to safe and abundant fresh food was emphasized by a slim majority of pragmatic stakeholders (e.g., local farmers, retailers, food transport), Will County's residents were also cited as crucial players in the local food system for their role as consumers.

We hope that consumers can be empowered to create change. (Local Farmer)

Even if local farmers and gardening groups remain the most visible part of the local food system, it is essential to find ways "to bring new farmers to the table" according to visionary and environmental and food justice advocate stakeholders. The Will County Land Use Department, Joliet Junior College Horticulture Sciences Department, Will County Health Department, Will County Board, and several Community Green Groups are actively spreading sustainability within the county. Stakeholders mentioned that these groups should be included in the "incubator" mechanism for Will County's community-based local food system (Figure 5). Furthermore, not-for-profit organizations were perceived as growing forces within the county and, therefore, were expected to play a pivotal role in increasing democratic, participatory decision-making about food system issues and improving food justice. In particular, not-for-profits and local governmental agencies were stressed as an ideal pathway to overcoming the differences in wealth, power, and privilege that have long shaped Illinois' food system. Respondents also advocated engaging with faith-motivated grassroots movements to positively

³ Cook County is the most populous county in Illinois and the second-most populous county in the U.S. after Los Angeles County, California. More than 40% of all Illinois residents live in Cook County.

influence Will County’s future course. One interviewee explained that “a more bottom-up process might even make urban agriculture project settings look different from what it has been planned initially. Not-for-profit are already key players in the county as they support low and moderate-income individuals to obtain opportunities to prepare themselves for self-sufficiency.” Not-for-profit organizations also work closely with the Northern Illinois Food Bank and many local food pantries, feeding programs, food producers and retailers, corporations, foundations, churches, and entities to accomplish the goal of “no individual left hungry in Northern Illinois” (Activist). Moreover, Will County Governmental Leagues (including 33 municipalities) were identified as partners to provide technical assistance and services and serve as a forum for cities to discuss mutual concerns and resolve community food issues.

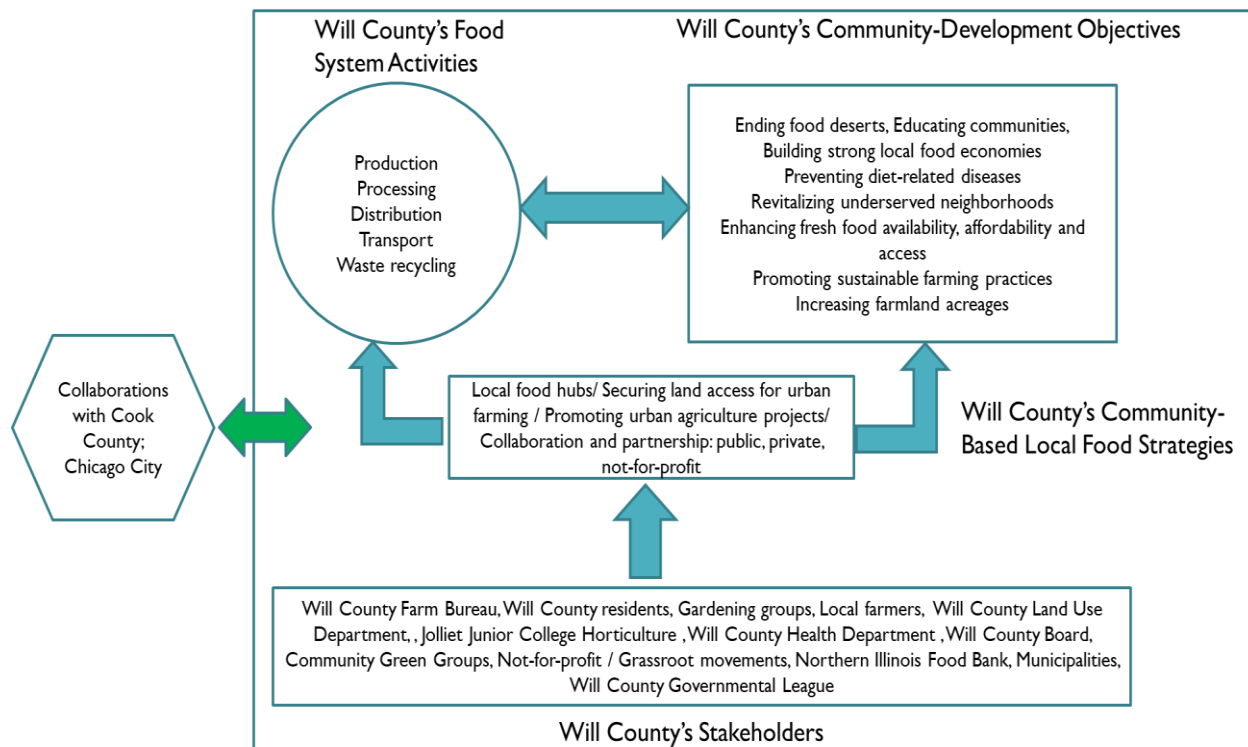
Will the Will County Center for Community Concerns and those in Will County Office of Education as well as the offices’ holders of the

surrounding towns and cities which support unincorporated communities have a role to play? (Community building specialist)

Finally, municipalities are perceived to play a role in placing the food system on the urban agenda by increasing the amount of land available for urban agriculture, securing its access, and developing meaningful ways to hear the three viewpoints expressed by stakeholders. Local farmers and activists, along with a land-use officer, emphasized municipalities for their role in scaling-up food systems and catalyzing innovation. They associated municipalities with redesigning local food governance by working closely with not-for-profit organizations and local communities. It is worth noting that municipalities have influenced recent municipal policy changes and increased support for new urban agriculture projects, such as community gardens.

Food is not just an agricultural or another rural issue anymore, and municipalities must make it

Figure 5. Will County’s Stakeholders and Food System’s Community Development Objectives and Strategies



visible and connect it to other networks such as transportation, employment, housing, and economic development systems. (Academic)

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The premise of this paper is that the first step in transforming the food system at the county level is to understand dominant stakeholder values and viewpoints. Our findings indicated that Will County stakeholders hold diverse food system values and a diverse understanding of food system governance. Identifying and understanding these viewpoints inform coalition-building strategies to create spaces for collective actions supporting community-based local food systems.

A food system's governance and policy span many areas and involve interplay between different levels of government that have varying degrees to which they can act. In the United States, food policy has primarily targeted the federal and state levels, which are the dominant divisions of power and control⁴. Some progressive change has been established in coordinated food policymaking actions in several states through state food system assessments, state food plans or charters⁵, and state food policy councils. At the local level, food system initiatives in cities such as Boston, Madison, New Haven, and Baltimore demonstrate the local government's efforts to shift the food system towards localism and sustainability. Despite this, it does not appear that counties received the same encouragement or support as cities to establish food policies and programs that focus on their communities' needs. We should, however, be aware that counties differ from cities in terms of scale, resources, the scope of services and programming, and governance.

In this study, Will County offered an opportunity to research the emergence of new actions within food policy and governance geared towards the county level. The survey was a valuable tool in identifying key players to work collaboratively towards building local food capacities and engaging

Will County's communities in a meaningful way. However, this paper is by no means comprehensive in our discussion of how stakeholders can work together in Will County.

Values and Viewpoints to Craft Community-Based Food Systems

This study demonstrates the push and pull that stakeholders face in expressing their viewpoints about community-based food systems while dealing with the constraints of their positions. According to their values and interests, stakeholders were categorized into three main viewpoints: pragmatic, environmental and food justice advocate, and visionary. We do not suggest that all, or even most, stakeholders fit neatly into one of these viewpoints or endorse all the elements of a particular viewpoint. Instead, the viewpoints are ideal types, or constructs, that clarify converging and opposing positions in the stakeholders' discourse. Although these viewpoints may, at some point, diverge from the current food political process and current stakeholders' engagement in Will County, the narratives suggested that a community-based local food system can bring many values, interests, and visions into the conversation, creating a plurality conducive to collaborative actions involving stakeholders beyond the current mainstream players in the food system.

The results indicated that the visionary viewpoint spans sustainability, food justice, value-added, and community building approaches of local food systems, overlapping with many of the values and interests expressed by pragmatic and environmental and food justice advocate viewpoints. According to visionary and pragmatic stakeholders, perhaps the most common area of concern was establishing food hubs as a cornerstone for a long-lasting change in Will County's food system. Visionary stakeholders emphasized food hubs as spaces for creating collaborations to align with alternative food networks and social movements (Levkoe et al., 2018) and food democ-

⁴ Federal government has authority over foods sold across state lines and the state government can regulate food sold within states lines.

⁵ For example, since 2013, Minnesota Food Charter serves as a policy roadmap to provide Minnesotans with access to affordable, safe, and healthy food regardless of where they live in the state.

racy goals (Perrett & Jackson, 2015). Visionary stakeholders also saw food hubs as a new organizational model to achieve economies of scale (Blay-Palmer et al., 2013; Matson et al., 2013). Visionary stakeholders exhibited a more comprehensive view of food hubs by including social and environmental values (LeBlanc et al., 2014), which goes beyond the narrow focus on market efficiency as expressed by pragmatic stakeholders. We argue that, for visionary stakeholders, food hubs represent what is described in the literature as Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) (Matson et al., 2013; Matson & Thayer, 2013). In the United States, CBOs have made a long-term commitment to empower local producers by supporting and developing infrastructure that sustains market access and continuously ensuring a leading role for them in food justice movements (Porter, 2018).

The acknowledgments of urban agriculture's prominent role in building community capacities (Stofferahn, 2012), enhancing geographic access to healthy food, and achieving distributive food justice (Horst et al., 2017) were other areas of agreement between stakeholders with environmental and food justice advocate and visionary viewpoints. For the former, these projects provide solutions for food availability and access issues faced by low-income communities, whereas, for the latter, they are opportunities for something more. Visionary stakeholders strongly emphasized urban agriculture as a value-added economic enabler. Many respondents to our survey reflected on the substantial support it has provided for creating alternative economic spaces, which reframed local economies by achieving alternatives to the mainstream food supply chain in Chicago and Cook County. Attaining similar goals in Will County requires a specific model for entrepreneurial urban agriculture that would attract population groups, mainly those in underserved and low-income areas. This vision of urban agriculture resonates with "the ripple effect" or "entrance economic development" effect of entrepreneurial urban agriculture identified by Fenestra et al. (1999). These effects translate into many benefits for local communities, such as retaining local control of new enterprises and activities, creating jobs, recirculating money in the local community, and making communities less

dependent on external organizations and agencies.

Some visionary respondents highlighted how urban agriculture is impacted by contradictory policy goals (land use department representative versus conservation specialist). Will County planning and zoning strategies are not adapted to integrate urban agriculture projects at a larger scale and need to be revised. The effort towards establishing a community-based local food system in Will County requires a comprehensive treatment of the values and viewpoints expressed by stakeholders. To date, these efforts are incomplete, and no local governmental organization has strongly advocated better economic conditions for local farmers while advancing food justice.

Most participants in this study shared the criterion that the government does not—and should not—act alone in making decisions and setting the goals of a food system. While conventional and corporate agriculture can still dominate the food system, Will County's local groups (activists, not-for-profit, public health, environmental conservation, educators, etc.) are increasingly employing a variety of efforts to meet the needs of all community members and support food security. This corroborates research describing community effort to challenge agribusiness and corporate farming practices (Lobao & Stofferahn, 2008) and characterizing communities as diverse social groups who coalesce through a shared spatial consciousness and collective determination to protect the lived environment (Haywood, 2014).

Coalition-Building Toward Community-Based Local Food System Planning

The Advocacy Coalition Framework applied in this study identified some degree of consensus around the need for a significant agri-food system policy and governance change. Critical areas where coalitions need to be built or improved upon between formal and informal organizations, associations, and Will County residents were determined to achieve a community-based food system in Will County. Stakeholders demonstrated a willingness and a strong commitment to translating their values and viewpoints into collective actions and policy solutions. These observations are, to some degree, consistent with previous agri-food stake-

holder behavior analyses (Benson et al., 2012; Garcia-Gonzalez & Eakin, 2019) and alternative and transformative food future studies (Balvanera et al., 2017; Sellberg et al., 2020). These studies stressed the importance of understanding the policy's local context complexity and accounting for the socioecological conditions in which food systems are embedded before transforming them.

The findings highlighted a consensus among stakeholders on the criterion that good food system governance and policy should be decentralized. It is, therefore, fundamental for policymaking at the county level to address specific challenges and support the values of Will County's local communities. Visionary stakeholders, environmental and food justice advocate stakeholders, and local farmers see local progress on food system issues as possible and incremental, without immediate changes on a larger scale. This implies that it is essential to allow local governments at the county level to create requirements and provide incentives or funding for food systems to deliver their inherent values even if the federal and state policies⁶ would still serve as baselines.

Will County's food system illustrates the importance of the partnership between civic capital and local authority to advance a community-based food system and offers another opportunity to study food's convening power as a policy topic (Clark, 2018; Sambell et al., 2019). The results underscored the work stakeholders, who represent different power dynamics, need to accomplish by cultivating relationships to achieve long-lasting and fruitful collaborations and partnerships.

In summer 2019, we presented the earliest responses from our questionnaire to the Will County Board and other stakeholders involved in the food system, including some of the respondents to our survey. Although the presentation facilitated sharing the stakeholders' vision about Will County's local and community-based food system, many participants pointed out that enacting a profound transformation will require local government to see itself as an agent of radical social and political change, rather than constrained to

land-use regulation and program implementation at the county level. This is challenging because, despite the rising political discourse on food issues at the national level in the United States (DePhelps et al., 2019; Hilchey et al., 2006; Gibbons et al., 2020; Low et al., 2015; Martinez, 2016; Okrent et al., 2018), the ongoing food strategy processes at the county level have only recently entered the public debate.

Our results reinforced those obtained by Ingold et al. (2017) in their study of drivers that shape actors' agreement in nascent policy subsystems (i.e., issues that recently entered the political agenda). According to the authors, collaborations between actors in political decision-making processes is crucial from both an actor and a process perspective. Along the same line of thought, López & Gugerell (2021) stress that institutional, social, and resource collaboration are crucial to fostering food democracy at the niche level within the food system. Hence, relevant stakeholders in the food system need to be represented at the beginning of the dialogue in order to evolve into a coalition that is an empowering mechanism for groups or individuals, which is critical for local food system initiatives to function effectively.

As of this writing, the job loss and other economic crises associated with the coronavirus pandemic have increased the rate of food insecurity in Will County. In 2021, Will County stakeholders assembled and began coordinating a project to reduce household food insecurity and increase education of healthy food options. The project has the working title of "Food For All, For A Healthier Community" (Figure 6). Local government (e.g., Will County, Farm Bureau, Health Department), not-for-profits (United Way of Will County, We Will Grow, Partner In Hope, Holstein Capital Development, National Hook-Up of Black Women, Joliet), and higher education (Lewis University, Governors State University) are working collaboratively as a food team. This coalition set specific objectives for 2022 to establish a sustainable, community-based local food system in Will County. Examining the

⁶ Along with their respective department of agriculture, department of public health, department of education, department of human services, and department of environmental protection.

Figure 6. Food For All—Building Food Community Empowerment in Will County



coalition members reveals that all three viewpoints identified by the authors are present. Not-for-profit organizations represent the Environmental and Food Justice Advocate. The Visionary is represented by both higher education institutions and local government, while the Pragmatic is represented by, once again, local government in addition to local food growers.

In our view, this is a positive step toward food system transformation in Will County and can lead to significant changes in the current sociotechnical system. Indeed, following O'Brien and Sygna (2013), transformations towards sustainability do not involve only individuals (stakeholders' values and viewpoints). It also requires a change in two other spheres: (1) the practical sphere, including technologies and institutional changes, and (2) the political sphere (including systems and subsystems levels). This reinforces a point made earlier when introducing this study—coordinating thriving

collaborative resources to set up a food policy council that allows Will County to support its community food system initiatives. Observations from this study illustrate the change that can be achieved through cross-sector (not-for-profit, private, and public), civically oriented coalitions and their potential in providing fresh momentum for food policy change at the county level.

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