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Economies of community in local agriculture: Farmers in New London, Connecticut, respond to the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the weaknesses of the U.S. national food system, with grocery store shelves emptied in March and April 2020 and COVID outbreaks reported throughout the summer of 2020 at meat processing plants across the country. Fleetingly, Americans turned to local farms to ensure they could access food safely in a time of uncertainty. This paper examines the economies of community that formed around local farms and how direct engagements between consumers and producers in the face of the pandemic deepened these economic structures that often put community well-being above profits. Within a capitalist system that prioritizes efficient mass production, economies of community illustrate that solidarity can improve local food system resilience. Based on qualitative and quantitative research carried out in the summer of 2020 in New London County in southeastern Connecticut, this research draws on ethnographic interviews with small-scale farmers who developed innovative ways to feed some of their community's most vulnerable members. Community economies show that we should not only depend on standardized large-scale farms and giant retail distribution; the American food system needs to continue to cultivate small-scale local production in order to improve resilience and food access. At present, the sustainability of producing and distributing food occurs at the farmer's expense. The government needs to support local food producers so they can continue to play an integral part in community well-being.

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Introduction

In April 2020, as the COVID-19 outbreak began to spread throughout the United States, national news highlighted the empty shelves of local supermarkets. For instance, produce and meat sections of stores, which had been brimming with a variety of options, were totally cleared out. Images of these desolate stores became part of common imagery on the television and in papers, causing consumer panic and reported hoarding in the face of scarcity. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted many of the weaknesses of the U.S. national food system and brought into question its resilience in the face of crisis (Anderson, 2020). As worries about the food supply escalated, we observed that Americans began to look beyond the supermarket for the first time in a long while. For instance, many in New London County turned to local farms to ensure they could access food safely in a time of uncertainty. This was also the case in many other places where local and alternative food systems provided a much-needed food supply during the pandemic (Nemes et al., 2021).

The growing season was not even in full swing in New England when farmers began to find innovative ways to deliver their goods to their new customers while figuring out how to make up for their loss of wholesale sales due to shuttered restaurants. What we witnessed was not only business innovation, but also the values and sense of community that is often at the core of small-scale farming. This paper examines the community economies that local farms and their customers created in this moment of crisis and how direct engagements between consumers and producers in the face of the pandemic deepen these economic structures that often put community well-being above profits. Within a capitalist system that prioritizes efficient mass-production, community economies illustrate that solidarity can improve emergency preparedness and improve local food system resilience. Based on qualitative and quantitative research carried out in the summer of 2020 in New London County in southeastern Connecticut (CT), we draw on surveys and ethnographic interviews with small-scale farmers who developed innovative ways to feed some of their community's most vulnerable members to better understand the strategies that farmers and their customers developed to adapt to the crisis and potential food shortages. This research demonstrates the ways in which local food systems are critical for resilience in the face of food insecurity and financial hardship. However, it also questions the sustainability of a way of producing and distributing food that often comes at the farmer's expense, as governmental support for local food systems remains inadequate and food prices stay artificially low. When investigated further, attempts at achieving food system resilience reveal inequities that a highly subsidized industrial food system has created. Community economies challenge the notion that the best way to produce and distribute food to people is through standardized large-scale farms and giant retail distribution, but it also shows how local food systems struggle to compete with conventional large-scale farming and distribution outside moments of crisis. This research will demonstrate that the interconnection between community members and farmers is a critical element for a more equitable form of resilience.

Much of the initial research on food system resilience and local responses to reduced food access during the COVID-19 pandemic has focused on conventional emergency food resources, such as food pantries (Hege et al., 2021; Schoenfeldt, 2020) and school food programs (Noyes & Lyle, 2021). There is also recent literature that considers how agroecological models might offer a more pandemic-proof food supply by focusing on small-scale, local production (Altieri & Nicholls, 2020). Additionally, studies are emerging that consider the responsiveness of farmers and policymakers to the challenges that the pandemic created for local food systems (Campbell, 2021; White, 2021). Only now are we starting to see work on the role of small-scale farmers in providing emergency food assistance to vulnerable community members and the resilience of these producers in providing food access during a pandemic (Little & Sylvester, 2022). This case study contributes to

the research on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and other disasters on local food system resilience. It also contributes to the literature on community economy and alternate economic forms that function within capitalist systems as mutual aid in times of crisis. The pandemic provided a rare opportunity to understand what alternatives to dominant food distribution systems exist when there are failures of those systems and local actors are obliged to find solutions closer to home.

Economies of Community and Values-Added in the Local Food System

During our interviews with farmers in New London County, producers noted that they continued to cultivate their relationships with customers and other farmers, despite the challenges created by the pandemic and the necessity for social distancing. We wanted to understand how they maintained these relationships and what these connections meant beyond the business of growing, buying, and selling food. Our observations showed that market transactions have more than economic value: mutual aid, care, and community well-being were at the forefront of many of these exchanges. Julie Gibson-Graham's concept of community economy (2006) fits well with the ways in which we observed farmers acting at the heart of a resilient local food system, particularly in a moment of crisis. Community economy is a concept that considers economic interdependencies that resocialize economic relations. Gibson-Graham states that "resocializing (and repoliticizing) the economy involves making explicit the sociality that is always present, and this constituting the various forms and practices of interdependence as a matter for reflection, discussion, negotiation, and action" (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 88). What arises out of these place-based, personal economic exchanges that we saw happening at farms was an "ethical praxis of being-in-common" (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 88).

We chose to analyze our data within the framework of community economy over a community capitals framework (CCF) because a community economy framework more actively draws into question the exploitative functioning of the mainstream capitalist economic system, in particular alienation from production, and refocuses the discussion of a sustainable economy on conviviality and sociality. Community economy points to a more "ethical practice of economy" with a focus on "resocializing economic arrangements" (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 79). The process of resocializing local food systems actively constructs new forms of value.

Clark et al. (2020) call for a "reorientation of the term "value-added" to "value(s)-added" to capture facets of food and agriculture development linked to community wealth" (p. 189). This concept of "value(s)-added" looks at the values expressed through supply-chain relationships, particularly in short food supply chains (SFSC), and how bringing farmers closer to consumers contributes to transparency, clearer provenance, and quality. The values that are added through this proximity can include sustainability, commitment to the consumer-producer relationship, and potential supply chain flexibility. These elements of value proved to be particularly valuable during the first part of the COVID-19 pandemic when conventional supply chains were failing.

Socially embedded economic exchanges are also a way to revalue the labor of producing food, and they contribute to local resilience through a commonality of localism: people come to share their attachments to place through such things as their views of land stewardship. When there are opportunities for exchange, people sharing a locality come to realize that they are not all in that place in the same way, and an awareness of inequality develops. At the same time, we consider what Born and Purcell (2006) call the "local trap," which "assumes that a local-scale food system will be inherently more socially just than a national-scale or global-scale food system" (p. 196). Chapman et al. (2019) raise the concern that local systems, as alternative food systems that can lead to incremental change, do not "confront the power of the neoliberal state directly" (p. 117). While this research is concerned with the resilience of local food systems in the face of disruption from a major public health crisis, we note that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted various groups unequally, and resilience is also an unequal phenomenon. We define food system resilience as the ability of local supply chains to provide food for

local populations, in this case, the people of New London County, in the face of disruption (Pingali et al., 2005; Worstell 2020). Gibson-Graham's (2006) community economies encourage the consideration of the response of individual actors and smaller groups, particularly when resilience is uneven and where food insecurity is an issue for vulnerable populations.

During the pandemic, community supported agriculture (CSA) programs connected members but also reached into the broader community to include and offer mutual aid to food-insecure people in the group, acknowledging community interconnectedness. Farmers markets and direct-to-consumer sales from farms became essential services during the pandemic, and they offered some of the few ways in which people remained connected to their communities (Morales, 2020). The partial failure of the national and international food systems spurred social interconnectedness around food production and distribution in many New London County communities. Focusing on social embeddedness and resilience, Gibson-Graham's (2006) concept of community economy provides a useful frame for understanding the social aspects of a resilient, local food system.

Methods

In the summer of 2020 in southeastern Connecticut, remote qualitative and quantitative research was conducted in collaboration with Connecticut College student researchers Emily Driscoll, Melissa Avilez Lopez, and Mary DiMaggio. Normally, this research would have been conducted face to face, but we had to adapt our methods to respond to the pandemic-related health crisis to ensure the safety of research participants and researchers. We moved from what would have been high-touch research methods to a physically distanced, remote form of data collection, which challenged our desire to study social interconnections but also helped us to think through how people were staying connected using technology to overcome physical distance. An online survey was sent out to 50 small-scale farms in New London County. The survey consisted of baseline questions to understand the size, production, and sales methods of the farms. We then asked questions about price and distribution changes the pandemic may have caused. We also investigated farmers' participation in emergency food assistance and collaboration between farmers. In order to define a population for this study, we had to do an inventory of small-scale farms in our study area because there were no available data. We defined a small-scale farm as having 1–10 acres of farmed land, 1–10 employees, and diversified crops. The USDA (2021) defines a small farm as "an operation with gross cash farm income under [US]$250,000" (para. 2), but we decided this definition did not give us a clear idea of what it meant to be a small farmer providing essential food access to the local New London area during the pandemic. For instance, farms producing high-end mushrooms and specialty products such as microgreens contribute to the local economy, but they are not necessarily part of a resilient, accessible food system for all. In addition, many farmers were hesitant to discuss their actual sales figures. We decided to include all farms producing foodstuffs, beyond specialty crops.

This survey garnered only a 5% response rate, and we attributed low participation rates to the increased workload of farmers due to the pandemic and online fatigue. While our survey results were statistically inconclusive, the responses we received gave us information from which to develop questions for qualitative data collection. The survey helped us understand the main concerns of farmers who were adapting their operations to serve local communities during the pandemic. It is from the survey data that we began to focus on questions of emergency food assistance and mutual aid. We conducted semi-structured remote interviews with six farmers. For this article, we chose to focus on Full Heart Farm, Hunts Brook Farm, and FRESH New London because the experience of these farms best demonstrated different aspects of the economies of community we wanted to explore. Through focusing on specific farms, we can offer the ethnographic details and voices that bring to life the lived reality, ingenuity, and care that farmers practiced in the early stages of the pandemic. These are details that are not captured in statistical data alone and are critical to the study of economies of community, which are based on human connections, everyday life, and the stories that help

make sense of them. However, we use data from the three other interviews to contextualize these case studies. It is important to note that all participants in this research represent the producer perspective in the community economy framework.

All interviews were transcribed, and a system of codes was developed based on emerging themes. The transcriptions were coded, and this is where our focus on economies of community emerged and where we saw this as a central theme in the three interviews that are the focus of this article. However, we do draw on our survey data and the other interviews to support our arguments. We have quoted from the ethnographic interviews to give a first-hand perspective on the experience of farmers during this moment of crisis. By doing so, we hope to show the strength and vision of the people who were innovating and responding to community needs at a time when other systems were failing.

Full Heart Farm

In September 2020, we interviewed Allyson Angelini, the principal farmer and owner of Full Heart Farm, a small family farm that grows pesticide-free and organic vegetables, herbs, and cut flowers in Ledyard, CT. This farm prioritizes and values sustainability, making good food accessible to everyone, and working with other local, sustainable businesses. When the pandemic began in March, a cold month with unpredictable weather in Connecticut, many growers were caught off-guard, as this is the time when they are focused on seeding and planting. Angelini noted, "I started planting as soon as the pandemic hit, so we were rolling in the salad greens." There was much uncertainty in the sustainability of taking on new customers, as she had to take on the additional responsibility of educating these consumers about the local food system and how its produce differs from what one buys at a supermarket. Angelini was also concerned that public interest would decline if she could not harvest food quickly enough to meet demand.

As a response, Angelini swiftly began connecting with other local food producers, farms, and chefs to form a farm collective: "It's never been my belief that farmers can go at it alone. The local food economy is very dependent on that relationship … everything's connected." Over 30 local businesses got involved in this aggregation project, all with the goal in mind to help support one another's sales and to provide those in need with access to fresh food. Angelini made it a priority to streamline the aggregation process. Farmers and local producers submitted the list of products they could provide to the collective on Saturdays; online ordering opened to the public from Sunday to Tuesday; farmers and local producers prepared and delivered their goods to Full Heart Farm; curbside pick-up for customers took place on Friday. Although the farm collective was expensive and time-consuming for Angelini to manage alongside running Full Heart Farm, she emphasized that "the work was really meaningful" and had allowed for many local businesses involved to stay afloat for enough time to create backup plans and/or rescale their business to fit new social distancing guidelines by creating new forms of distribution that would be safe for both consumers and producers.

During this time, Full Heart Farm was also running its summer CSA program, which provides vegetable and flower shares to 100 families each week for 13 weeks of the summer. For the 2020 summer season, sign-ups began in March and quickly closed midway through the month. Angelini explained that normally shares sold out by April, but that this season there was "certainly more interest." Many people were contacting her about the possibility of additional shares; however, it was not possible to add more and scale up the CSA because much of the growing season, including cover cropping and supply ordering, had been planned a year in advance.

To minimize physical contact, the CSA transitioned its distribution from a market-style pick-and-choose farm stand to a prepackaged curbside pick-up or home delivery share. Additional staff were hired to assist in packaging and storing shares in a cooler as well as ensuring everything was being extensively cleaned and sanitized. Overall, investing in more time, extra staff, reusable plastic totes for shares, an extra cooler, cases of disposable gloves, multiple gallons of hand sanitizer, and other inputs to make the CSA program run safely under the new circumstances led to financial loss for Full Heart Farm.

Yet, Angelini stresses that everyone "did really good work this year" and feels that her CSA members, many of whom have continuously participated in the CSA program since it began 9 years prior, "valued the investments in both time and energy and tangible expenses … made to ensure their safety." Social contact was difficult to maintain due to the necessity of social distancing, but Angelini tried to give people a connection to the farm through videos about everyday life on the farm as well as weekly newsletters with detailed recipes using vegetables from the CSA share, discussion about the local food system, and personal anecdotes. For Angelini, knowing that people trust Full Heart Farm to grow and safely provide good quality food to them is what makes it rewarding: "We know everyone we feed. … That's what brings meaning to my work. Otherwise, I'm just growing vegetables and it's so hot outside." Full Heart Farm and Angelini's reach extended beyond CSA members and those who purchased from the farm collective, to those most vulnerable in the community. In addition to donating food to the local food bank, Angelini also did casket arrangements during a time when many florists were closed and unavailable, which is something the farm did not normally provide as a service. Angelini insisted, "I didn't want my community to suffer," a statement that displays her awareness of the needs of the larger community and the lengths to which she went to provide aid that allowed others to persevere through the pandemic.

While Angelini at Full Heart Farm was giving her all to help others, she lacked aid in critical ways. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted a lack of support for small-scale farmers and local food producers and greater structural issues in the U.S. national food system that were shown through Full Heart Farm and Angelini's experiences. Initially, Angelini could not get necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves, masks, and hand sanitizer, which would allow her and her staff to safely harvest, process and package the farm's produce. She was frustrated by the lack of availability of PPE, its rising cost when it could be found, and the fact that the state did little to ensure frontline workers, like farmers, had access to this critical equipment.

Full Heart Farm embodies an interconnectedness with the community that has formed around the farm, resulting in a more resilient local food system, one that helps keep local businesses going in the face of disruption and a system that provides food when national supply chains fail. Angelini started the farm collective in the spring of 2020, which brought together local food producers and used Full Heart Farm as an aggregator for the sale and distribution of food beyond what was produced at the farm. Angelini explained that the local food economy surrounding Full Heart Farm is contingent upon everyone's success; if local food businesses, such as restaurants, were to fail, this would have a negative effect on farms and local consumers. It was through collaborative reflection, planning, and action that Angelini and other local food producers were able to navigate the challenge of implementing new food distribution methods and making fresh food accessible to local community members.

The farm collective offered prepared meals from a restaurant that specialized in locally sourced food; a pickle company offered a variety of pickles; a bakery joined in to offer bread; and there were farms that offered frozen meat and fishers who contributed fresh seafood. The offerings changed from week to week and depended on seasonal availability, but there was always a wide variety of items available. Customers used an online platform to order, the producers brought their food to Full Heart Farm, and Angelini and her small team packaged up the orders. On pick-up day, cars lined up at the farm and masked helpers placed the orders in the open trunks of the waiting vehicles. This operation required Angelini to buy new refrigeration units and pay for packing materials, and it required additional labor to prepare the orders. In the end, the costs were high, and the profit margins were low. However, Angelini felt it was necessary to innovate, work with other food producers, and make sure that healthy, safe food was available to community members.

The bonds that had been created through previous social engagements and a sense of responsibility for the well-being of customers that local food producers knew personally became a driving force for Angelini and other food producers to

continue supporting a vision of sustainability for the local community. The case of Full Heart Farm demonstrates the agility of small-scale farms to respond to crisis by working with partners in the local food system and adopting new technologies and ways of doing.

Hunts Brook Farm

Robert "Digga" and Teresa Schacht are the owners and farmers of Hunts Brook Farm, a vegetable farm, in Quaker Hill, CT. Hunts Brook Farm, at its core, has a philosophy of "growing healthy, beautiful food" for the local community using socially responsible and environmentally friendly methods, similarly to Full Heart Farm and other small-scale farms in the area. The Schachts believe in collaboration to build a stronger community and aim to improve food access and education on food, farming, and the environment. The farm offers a farm stand and a CSA program that provides a share of diverse vegetables to feed a family of four every Wednesday for 18 weeks during the growing season. Hunts Brook Farm also sells its produce at farmers markets and through wholesale outlets, mainly to the local cooperative grocery store and a few restaurants. Regarding community outreach, Hunts Brook Farm gives members the opportunity to donate to the Family in Need Fund, which provides a CSA share to local families in need, notably local military families and families with single caregivers. The farm also supports community gardens and food projects and participates in panel discussions, workshops, and seminars that teach others about agriculture, sustainability, and food.

At the start of March 2020, even before Hunts Brook Farm began selling produce, Digga Schacht noticed that the emptying of grocery stores created a panic that led to people driving from across the state to get food from other farms nearby, noting that "there was no limit as to what somebody would do to get what they had." As COVID-19 cases began to spread at an alarming rate, Schacht quickly shifted away from his usual strategy of selling at local farmers markets and focused on the CSA, adding additional members as an increasing number of requests came in from customers. He even extended CSA pick-up by another full day and created an on-farm open air farmers market at the farm. This allowed for him to sanitize areas in between each customer visit and prevent crowding to streamline the process of customers getting their food while maintaining social distancing. Communication was key to making sure that customers felt safe. Schacht recalled that many customers were nervously "throwing their bag onto the table and taking three steps back," so he began letting customers know about the sanitation procedures in place on the farm. Schacht also explained that he was taking cash payments through a bucket to reduce any cross-contamination from handling money and produce. This put customers at ease and gave Schacht the impression that they trusted Hunts Brook Farm to feed them even during the pandemic.

The way that Schacht maintained a sense of community with CSA members and other customers changed due to new safety protocols. He remarked that it was difficult "not being able to hug each other … not being able to sit and chat" due to changes in distribution methods. The fast-paced, almost mechanical process of customers pulling up in their cars, waiting for their turn, walking up and setting down their basket, and returning to their car with a full basket in tow left little room for exchanges that were commonplace before COVID. Schacht joked that he smiled to customers with his eyes and expressed that people, himself included, were having to "discover a refeeling" of community due to changing ways of socializing during these times. This sense of togetherness and care was exhibited in other ways as well. During the 2020 season, Schacht estimates that the number of donations and people interested in donating to the Family in Need Fund tripled or quadrupled, allowing seven shares to be given to families in need, a number greater than ever before. Hunts Brook Farm reminded CSA members that they had the option to forward their share to a family in need if they were unable to pick it up in any given week. Schacht maintains a list of vulnerable community members and passes on uncollected shares to them when possible.

Hunts Brook Farm has always believed that working together is the key to a resilient, compassionate future for everyone involved; this means that just as local consumers are supported by local

food producers, local food producers require the support of their local community to thrive. Schacht recounted that as COVID caseloads dropped in Connecticut and life became "somewhat normal" again, some customers "slid right back to the 'okay well, Stop & Shop [grocery store chain] is an easy stop'" mentality and routine. Without sales from local farmers markets for most of the 2020 growing season, the farm was losing about US$1,000 a week for several weeks. Customers who continued to visit the on-farm farmers market made larger overall purchases, as they were doing all their shopping there as opposed to purchasing from various locations. Although 2020 ended being an extremely profitable season for Hunts Brook Farm due to some loyal customers and being able to start selling produce again at a local farmers market in the fall, Schacht worries about the sustainability of his business and of small-scale food production in general. He shared that while he is glad that minimum wage is rising, he is worried about labor costs because "if the price of a head of lettuce doesn't climb with it, and people aren't willing to spend a little bit more on food, then all of that is going to come out of our bottom line. … The question is whether they are willing to pay the true cost of production."

Schacht added that raising the price of his produce has not been possible for the past five years, citing worries of losing customers and of not being able to continue helping feed the food-insecure as deterring him from doing so. Being situated in a place where many people compare prices with regular grocery stores and make their decision based on that is difficult, he explains, as "people can't help but flock to the cheapest, less expensive thing there is." When an industrial-scale vegetable farm sells cantaloupes, for example, the cost is around US$2 a piece, but if Hunts Brook Farm were to charge that amount, it would be unsustainable; according to the farmer, three beds out of the four-acre farm would be used and if 150 melons were grown at US$2 a piece, a crate of them would earn the farm a mere $100. Schacht argues that:

> As minimum wage rises and as the costs of having to do what we do rises, food is going to get more expensive. As a society, as a whole, we have undervalued food in a lot of ways, and I want people to understand that most farmers are not doing farming to enrich ourselves monetarily. To value food for what it truly costs to produce, it is an important thing for people to understand.

This emphasizes the importance of change on a greater scale to support local food producers, both from a consumer perspective and from a government perspective. Some of this change has begun on a municipal level, as evidenced by Schacht's experience with the mayor of Montville, CT. Prior to the COVID lockdown, he called the mayor of Montville to ask if it would be possible to pass an ordinance that would exempt farm structures from property taxes, something Schacht was interested in because he owned potential farmland there. The mayor said he would look into it, and eventually called Schacht back to tell him that the ordinance was now passed. If local, small-scale farms are going to be viable businesses in southeastern Connecticut, municipalities will have to develop more strategies like this to help ensure that farming is an economically sustainable activity. For Hunts Brook Farm and other local farms, this expression of support on a community level was appreciated, though Schacht added that "collaboration on many levels" is needed to truly help promote local food production.

The community economy surrounding Hunts Brook Farm prioritizes collaboration and has community well-being at the center of its initiatives and exchanges. Although the pandemic changed the way that people communicated with each other, Hunts Brook Farm was able to change its distribution to provide access to fresh food while upholding social distancing and sanitation standards to keep everyone safe.

FRESH New London

In early fall 2020, we also interviewed Alicia McAvay, the director of FRESH New London, a nonprofit organization based in New London, CT, which focuses on urban agriculture and social justice. Its activities center around growing food, empowering youth, and connecting communities. We have included FRESH in our research because in 2019 it offered a CSA, and it also became an

emergency food provider during the pandemic. The CSA program is connected with the organization's goals of growing food and teaching others to grow food for themselves; it is the only CSA in New London County whose subscriptions work on a sliding scale. Members who can afford to pay full price for their shares subsidize the shares of those who cannot afford the full CSA membership. McAvay explained that grants and private donations also help fund the CSA in order to make it as accessible as possible. Although this program is not fully engaged in the market economy, the FRESH CSA embodies core principles of community economies through this economic connection of members supporting members that works to make fresh local produce accessible to all community members. FRESH provides an opportunity for a structured form of mutual aid.

Unlike the other cases explored here, FRESH is not a commercial farm and, as McAvay puts it, "we don't really communicate our success in pounds of food. We usually communicate it to people connected to our work." This idea of connecting people is at the heart of community economies; FRESH espouses embeddedness in its core values. In a regular year, FRESH's urban agriculture activities would be the main way in which community members would be brought together; as McAvay says, "Gardening in a public space is one thing, it's not what the vision of community gardening for FRESH New London is. Community gardening for FRESH New London is gardening in community and being able to be in that community, not just having your own plot to grow food in, in a public area." FRESH regularly holds community events, such as dinners prepared in its brick oven in one of the gardens and an annual plant sale. All of this had to change when the pandemic hit. McAvay shared that "You know it's the informal things that are actually the most impactful sort of connections that happen at FRESH and that's what really suffered, for sure. … We did find ways, we've done Zoom workshops and we were able to keep the gardens open which was important, but again in a really different way. We are still connected. I am still texting, talking to, and hearing from gardeners even if they're not hearing from each other."

McAvay emphasized that the CSA pick-up was an important social moment when members would socialize as they selected their week's produce, which was laid out in a market style. With the necessity of social distancing, FRESH had to invent a new contactless pick-up system. Reusable plastic bins were purchased, they were loaded each week, and members were told to open the trunks of their cars and not get out while a FRESH employee or volunteer placed the bin in the car trunk. As the summer went on, more chatting started to occur between FRESH staff and members. Members also got in the habit of chatting while waiting on the sidewalk with masks on. Not even social distancing could undermine the community's desire to socialize around food.

FRESH found itself carrying out a lot of activities that were not in the organization's mission statement. With regards to the CSA, McAvay explained that initially part of FRESH's mandate was to get food to people who needed it. However, that shifted, and the organization began to focus more on empowering people to take control of their food, particularly by growing their own. The idea was to grow food with people and not for them. However, the CSA is an income stream that allows FRESH to not be entirely dependent on grants and outside funding. During the pandemic, the need to feed people has increased and FRESH has had to rethink its activities yet again.

New London is already a largely food-insecure area, and the pandemic made the situation worse. Feeding America (2019) estimates that the rate of food insecurity in New London County is 11.7%, which means 31,300 food-insecure people, and the rate of child food insecurity is 16.8%, or 8,930 children in New London County. Initial data shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused major setbacks in reducing food insecurity. The Connecticut Office of Legislative Research (Proto, 2020) projected that the 2020 rate of food insecurity in New London County would rise to 17%, more than a 5% increase over the previous year. For the city of New London, the rate of food insecurity is much higher, at 21%, which is above the 11.9% average for the state of Connecticut (Gundersen, et al., 2018). New London meets the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) for the

National School Lunch Program (NSLP). This means that over 40% of students are low-income and qualify for free meals (USDA, 2019).

During the pandemic, families who depended on school food programs initially had trouble accessing those programs because schools were closed. Other groups who were hard hit were undocumented migrants who feared being asked for papers or identification at food pantries and other emergency food outlets. The people working at FRESH became acutely aware of this need for emergency food for vulnerable populations, and they understood the importance of providing food without asking any questions. McAvay noted that "there's not a built-in value of dignity around emergency food systems." So, FRESH began delivering food to households in need on Fridays through what they call "Food to the People," a mutual delivery pantry. Providing emergency food was not part of their original mandate, but they found themselves doing this work:

> The downside of it, while I feel like it's really important, is that the amount of resources that it takes to run these emergency food options, these pantries and soup kitchens and other stuff, doesn't let you pick your head up and look at what's wrong with the system. You don't have any time to do anything about it, and we are a systems change organization.

McAvay did not see this new emergency element of FRESH's activities as a long-term organizational shift. She says that COVID-19 has moved FRESH to focus on organizational relationships and building mutual aid support; these growing local coalitions add strength when facing structural issues.

Discussion

Community Economy and Resilience

Gibson-Graham and other theorists may have envisioned community economy as a radical alternative or, at a minimum, a form of resistance to capitalist economies. However, in the case of small-scale local agriculture during the COVID-19 pandemic, we were able to see how community economies were key to creating a resilient local food system in New London County, CT. The way in which we conceive of resilience here, drawing the social into the economic and environmental, follows Lockie's (2016) call for a reconsideration of resilience theory, one that analyzes "the roles of power, agency, values, solidarity, heterogeneity and conflict in social systems" (p. 116).

At Full Heart Farm, the farm collective distribution method allowed for local food producers to connect by reflecting on how their businesses were affected by the pandemic, offering each other mutual support, and collaboratively coming up with strategies to sustain business both for their own benefit and to ensure that all community members had access to food. This connection in itself is meaningful because the conditions of the pandemic caused many to feel isolated and struggle in finding help. The collective provided a means to navigate these worries for the betterment of the overall community. This work, at its core, exhibits the value of interdependence in community economies through a community of local food producers coming together to provide mutual support to each other and combine their efforts to persevere amid the pandemic. The necessity of long-term planning is one of the reasons why most farms cannot respond to crises with much agility. However, through sharing resources and coming together to create a common marketing platform that appealed to consumers because of the variety of products available in one stop, Full Heart Farm and other small local food producers were able to overcome these constraints to some degree.

Sustainability and Government Support

Schacht's positive experience with the municipality of Montville is an example of how local governments can support farms through tax breaks on farm structures. Unfortunately, these types of incentives and aid need to be negotiated on a municipality-by-municipality basis, which makes this challenging because of the political differences in each locality. Unlike Montville, Ledyard, where Full Heart Farm is located, has tried to pass local bylaws making it harder for farmers there to sell directly to consumers. Angelini had to spend precious time lobbying local residents for their support to block these proposals. The political hetero-

geneity and fragmentation of food policy in New London County has made it challenging to bring about a broader change toward local small-scale farms and the systemic development of a more robust local food system. The dissolution of the New London County Food Policy Council in 2018 has also made coordinated efforts more difficult to achieve on a countywide scale.

With the failure of unified efforts to encourage local farming and ensure food security in New London County, the onus has fallen on producers as well as the families and individuals who support them. Hunts Brook Farm community members created interdependence through collective funding to provide struggling families with food aid from the farm's surplus and through networking. In spite of success in bringing many consumers good quality food during a period when food insecurity suddenly skyrocketed, Schacht raised critical questions and concerns about the sustainability of long-term food production from a small producer perspective, drawing attention to the resiliency of the local food system depending on collaborative action and change at multiple scales. We observed that the local scale offered interesting opportunities for building food system resilience in the face of crisis, but, at the same time, this resilience came at a cost and was not necessarily equitable for producers and consumers in the area that we studied.

The state of Connecticut has high taxes and land prices (Hewitt, 2020; USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service [USDA NASS], 2020), which make it expensive for business owners like Angelini and Schacht to run their farms, own land, and hire staff; this increases overall food production costs. Full Heart Farm and Hunts Brook Farm, like many small-scale farms and food producers, often have to sell their goods at prices lower than the cost of production because if they did not, it would mean fewer community members would be able to afford access to local food. Further, Angelini mentioned that the U.S. Small Business Administration excluded small farmers in their payroll protection program during the COVID-19 pandemic, although small farms were some of the businesses still expected to run at full capacity. Even after lobbying, only small farmers growing commodity crops were included in the program, which excluded farmers like Angelini in the state of Connecticut and the New England region (Curry, 2020). These circumstances draw into question the federal and local governments' commitment to small-scale farming, particularly producers who serve local markets. The absence of a local food policy council to bring together local concerns and propose scale-appropriate action makes it hard for individual actors to get the support they need on a county, state, and regional level (Blay-Palmer et al., 2020).

Local Food Access and Food Security

From a food access and food security perspective, Hunts Brook Farm offers an example of how a farm and its CSA program can provide direct action to address food insecurity in the community. The community that formed around Hunts Brook Farm from its CSA program and regular farm customers demonstrated an awareness of inequality in food access and responded when farmer Schacht offered opportunities to donate funds for community shares for families in need and by donating unused shares. There are other examples in New London County of how farms tried to address food insecurity at the height of the pandemic. One farmer who was interviewed mentioned setting up a "pay what you can" table at the side of the road. Although the logistics were often challenging, several farmers mentioned making donations to local food banks and emergency feeding programs. Almost all the interviewees demonstrated an awareness and concern for food insecurity in the pandemic and, as food producers, they all found different ways to engage with this problem and offer solutions. The pandemic affected everyone and built up mutual aid support that strengthened interdependence between members of the community, which is one of the central features of building an economy of community.

Through this research we have looked at ways in which the local food system in New London County demonstrated resilience in a crisis, but we also saw a need to take a critical look at the concept of food system resilience. It is necessary to look past the coping and survival mechanisms of individual actors to consider what makes that survival necessary (Kaika, 2017). Even if they are

somewhat precarious actors in the larger food system, small-scale farmers in New London County were able to adapt to the crisis situation that the pandemic created. However, rather than operating as a safety net or stop-gap solution, the government and local communities need to regularly support local farms so that they are a robust element of the food system at all times. This is where we noticed an absence of unified policy most. Our critical approach to resilience also considers how not all inhabitants of New London County were as resilient as others. For this reason, we cannot imagine "the community" to be a homogeneous entity; community members have different economic means and resources are distributed unevenly.

There are barriers to accessing local food, and it is not always an option for some of the most vulnerable inhabitants of New London County. Although FRESH New London tried to address food insecurity in the urban area of New London, farms outside the city were largely unable to deliver their produce to people who needed it in this area. Emergency food distribution in New London had a hard time transporting produce from local farms and dealing with the perishable produce once it arrived at distribution centers. Many people in New London have no way of reaching farms, and using public transportation to supermarkets can also be a challenge. For these reasons, locally produced food on its own is not the answer to building a robust local food system. In order to create a more just food supply in southeastern Connecticut, local food needs to be considered in relation to the broader food system and systemic barriers to social equality, from inequitable land access to poor public transportation. The food system is an integral part of the economy, social structures, and public health.

Although farmers wanted to feed people during the pandemic, at times there were barriers to donating food to local emergency food providers. One interviewee mentioned that the local food pantry was unable to come and pick up produce at farms. They told her that they preferred cash donations. Harvesting food to donate to the emergency food system can also be costly for farmers. One interviewee told us that volunteer gleaning teams who harvest surplus produce are important for farmers to be able to donate food without incurring additional costs. Many low-income households were unable to get to farms and could not afford the food there. However, one farmer we interviewed told us that during the pandemic, they set up a self-serve table at the farm where people could take the food they needed and were asked to pay what they could on an honors system. Although some farmers worked hard to be able to accept electronic benefits transfer (EBT) for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (SNAP), a substantial quantity of local food remained out of reach to those most in need. We saw how organizations like FRESH New London pivoted to respond to the urgent needs of people, particularly undocumented people in urban areas, who faced barriers to accessing the emergency food system.

Mutual Aid

From our interviews with small-scale local farms, we discovered that farms are deeply embedded in their communities, and this is one of the elements that allowed them to respond effectively to their community's needs during a time of crisis. In our broader research, we found that a number of farms offered mutual aid to community members in need, which was part of a broader trend toward mutual aid during COVID-19 (Springer, 2020). In this case, mutual aid took the form of asking CSA members to donate to a fund that covered shares for families in need, setting up tables with free produce, or donating to local food pantries and soup kitchens. Farmers were not going to let people in their community go hungry, and part of this also meant keeping prices low, even if it meant cutting into their profits. We heard about farmers helping each other in order to bring their goods to market, whether it was sharing a farmers market stall or being part of an effort to aggregate fresh food and prepared food products and deliver them to customers. The pandemic underlined the solidarity that exists between local farmers and food businesses and between farms and their customers.

Technology and New Forms of Distribution to Shorten the Supply Chain

The small-scale farming in New London County

made it possible for many farms to pivot to new forms of distribution. In particular, a number of farms adopted online sales platforms and contactless pick-up, which helped customers access food safely. Technology was also used to help aggregate goods and to maintain a sense of community. The ability of farmers to adopt new technologies for selling their goods and for communication with their customers and community was an important part of maintaining the embeddedness of the local food system. Our research supports Michel-Villarreal et al.'s (2021) findings that digital technologies are potentially enablers of SFSC resilience.

Community economies are at the heart of what FRESH New London does, from teaching people to grow their own food, be more self-sufficient, and take control of where they are getting food, to running a CSA program that is based on interdependence with its sliding scale of rates. The FRESH CSA is about community members lifting each other up. The social engagements that are critical to FRESH's mission were challenged by the pandemic, but people still managed to find moments of exchange at a time when everyone was isolated out of necessity. Although it was not part of FRESH's original activities, emergency food and the response of mutual aid created new forms of interconnectedness and interdependence between the organization and individuals, and coalitions were formed with other local organizations that will help everyone move forward in tackling structural change in the future. However, FRESH's director made it clear that a resilient local food system would not be possible unless structural issues were addressed.

Conclusion

For Gibson-Graham (2006), community economies represent an alternative production and distribution format to a capitalist system, one which focuses on how the social relationships between producers and consumers strengthen the economic resilience of the local food system. This concept of economic resilience is closely tied to the social embeddedness of people living in a specific locality. In the Full Heart Farm case study, we saw that the aggregation by local food producers provided a means to reflect on the impact of the pandemic on businesses. This group of producers showed how they could collaborate to continue local food production and distribution in order to fill the gap that was created by closed grocery stores on which many community members relied. Similarly, at Hunts Brook Farm, community interdependence was facilitated by Schacht keeping a list of community members who needed aid and by collective community donation efforts to provide free farm produce shares to those vulnerable community members. Both Full Heart Farm and Hunts Brook Farm kept their produce prices low at their own expense, keeping food affordable for community members both out of a sense of personal responsibility for feeding people and also out of fear of not being able to sell their produce at higher prices.

Our third case study, FRESH New London, raised related themes of local food distributors' and producers' adaptability by connecting to one another and to community members to provide mutual aid and support via temporary emergency food aid programs and partnerships; FRESH was unique in that it also strengthened community connection and food access through youth empowerment programs and a sliding scale CSA program, respectively. As a systems change organization, FRESH did not see emergency aid and current local food system resilience as a true solution to structural issues of food insecurity, lack of food access, and poverty, but instead akin to trying to fix a hole on the road by using plaster instead of asphalt. The bigger problem is the inequity between local, national, and global food systems.

We saw how farms connected people in the community. The social bonds that had been developing organically before the pandemic strengthened and were tested when the crisis hit. This is evidenced in the aftermath of the pandemic: there is a need to continue to build community around food production and distribution. It is the community economy aspect of the local food system that has helped many people in New London County through the crisis. Now it is time to focus on the lessons learned from the pandemic to try to build on the local food system's strengths that we outlined here, but also to address the weaknesses, such as a lack of support for small-scale farmers from the government and consumers (Anderson, 2020).

Large-scale commercial agriculture is subsidized, which leads to lower food prices at large retail grocery stores. People who shop in supermarkets are used to paying these low, subsidized prices and they are often shocked, unwilling, or unable to pay the price of local food, which is unsubsidized, does not benefit from economies of scale, and is often higher priced because it must account for the true costs of production. As a result, small-scale food producers repeatedly resort to selling their products for lower prices, which can be personally unsustainable. Gibson-Graham (2006) likely envisioned community economies as a means for ensuring the well-being and resilience of the local food system and all community members through resocialized economic exchanges, but in our case studies, we see that the economic costs to local food producers lead to a system that may not be resilient long-term without external support. The two-tiered agricultural system in the United States makes it nearly impossible to achieve the resilience that Gibson-Graham envisioned. Small-scale farmers and food producers require state and federal governments to support these forms of agriculture and food production because they contribute to food security as well as maintain healthy and just communities, particularly in times of crisis.

We acknowledge that this work focuses primarily on the producer perspective in local food systems and that further research on consumer perspectives, particularly on how food and labor are valued and influenced by structures such as systemic racism and socioeconomic inequalities, are needed for a more holistic understanding of food systems and their resilience. However, we believe our research brings to light the inequalities that exist between large-scale and small-scale farming and the ways in which this uneven system both disconnects people from agricultural production and hinders the creation of robust local food systems.

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