

# Farmers market manager networks for sustainability, support, and innovation

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## Abstract

In most states, farmers markets function independently of each other and subsist on modest budgets. The groups and programs that bring independent farmers market managers together for education, collaboration, and sharing are often funded through government programs and grants. With increasing uncertainty of grant funding and government programs, alternative low-cost ways to sustain markets, mentor managers, and foster innovation in local food systems are needed. Business networks and clusters have been successful in other industries. To evaluate the potential of this type of network in mentoring, knowledge sharing, and facilitating collective fund development among farmers market managers, a study was conducted in three regions of Wisconsin. The study included the creation of regional network groups that collabo-

rated on a market promotion project for the benefit of all network markets, utilizing a decision-making tool, the Purpose, Assessment, Tactics, Implementation (PATI) Framework. Overall, these networks were successful. Managers valued belonging to the network, successfully collaborated on regional projects, and intended to continue with the network once the study concluded.


## Keywords

networks, clusters, farmers market, PATI Framework, organizational capacity

## Introduction and Literature Review

Farmers markets are an important part of many U.S. communities, providing access to fresh local food, opportunities for small business start-ups, and community connections. In many urban and

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rural areas, people have limited access to grocery stores (Rhone, 2025) and limited economic/entrepreneurial opportunities (McGranahan & Beale, 2002). Farmers markets can provide both. However, many communities have limited economic resources to devote to developing and maintaining farmers markets. Where they exist, most operate with little or no budget for staff or infrastructure.

The threat to farmers market sustainability comes from multiple sources. Communities have more limited local tax bases, state-funded resources are being reduced, and federal funding has been sharply curtailed (Kirwan, 2025; Metz & Scherer, 2022; Sullivan, 2025). Reductions in federal funding of programs that support farmers markets include the elimination of nutrition education through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), reduced funding levels for programs that support the purchase of local produce (SNAP, Farmers Market Senior Vouchers, and Farmers Market Women and Infant Children (WIC) vouchers), and the uncertainties involving federal grants that fund farmers market education, nutrition incentives, and rural development. Because farmers markets function as sources of healthy food, drivers of local economies, and community gathering spaces, alternative ways to sustain this valuable resource are urgently needed.

To help farmers markets survive, this study examined whether the formation of networks is a strategy that can help sustain markets while addressing manager needs. Because farmers market managers often have limited resources beyond their time and expertise, we chose to initiate regional networks designed to facilitate idea sharing, problem solving, and collaboration that would continue beyond the grant period without the need for external funding. This study served to bring market managers otherwise likely to continue working independently together into regional networks. Three regional farmers market manager networks were created to study the ability of regional networks to fulfill the goals of collaboration, sharing, and problem solving for farmers markets and market managers.

The network/cluster model was chosen for the initiative because its utility is well documented for

businesses and other organizations. Its benefits include “opportunities for collaboration, knowledge, and resource sharing” (Beckie et al., 2012, p. 334). Networks speed up the diffusion of knowledge, including practices that are widely known, by providing information on costs and benefits of adoption at a greater level of detail and persuasiveness than other information sources (Brass et al., 2004). Network members share their firsthand experiences with project budgets, public engagement, preferred contractors, and potential challenges with each other, giving this information more significance and relevance than information gained from non-managers or those not familiar with the region.

Networks serve as more than a place for sharing ideas and practices. They also provide a vehicle for creating relationships and trust, connections that help managers feel more like a team and less like competitors. As well as being proximally located, knowledge diffusion is amplified by their similarity of social, organizational, and strategic characteristics. These similarities generally “ease communication, increase the predictability of behavior, and foster trust and reciprocity” (Brass et al., 2004, p. 796). It is through this process of “coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” that organizations create trust and in turn social capital (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). As trust and social capital grow, so too does the willingness of members to exchange valuable knowledge grow (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). Social interactions and trust form the social infrastructure needed for knowledge exchange to take place and are the essential glue that holds clusters together (Porter, 1998); “only by being in the same local environment, and meeting repeatedly in person, can and will such more subtle forms of information be exchanged” (Bathelt et al., 2004, p. 32).

Creating an effective network is not simple. “Communities are fluid—always changing, adapting, growing; they are ready for different things at wholly different times” (Edwards et al., 2000, p. 293). Qualitative evidence suggests initiative implementation is influenced by several organizational and community readiness factors, including norms and beliefs, capacity, social capital, logistic factors, and sustainability issues (Freedman et al.,

2012). Although farmers markets may appear to be similar in mission, location, size, and products available, “each community may be at a different level of readiness and capacity to initiate community-based interventions” (Edwards et al., 2000, p. 293). Organizational and individual capacity are crucial factors in the success of a network. “Efforts by local people are likely to have the greatest and most sustainable impact on local programs and the setting of local norms. When community resources are tapped, efforts are more likely to be based on concepts and ideas that are ethnically and socially appropriate for that unique community” (Edwards et al., 2000, p. 292). Although the representatives of farmers markets are inherently local, network involvement from market leadership may come from a variety of roles and organization types, from the farmer acting as the market manager to the president of the local downtown business association. “Leaders are the core component of a community’s capacity. They facilitate and give direction to the work of community organizations” (Chaskin et al., 2001, p. 27). Each network member brings a unique perspective.

The capacity of markets and the individuals that run them are also affected by external conditions. “Changes taking place at the industry level have repercussions at the organizational, work unit, and individual level and vice versa” (Brass et al. 2004, p. 808). Entities can affect the success of an initiative through whom takes part and their level of participation. Participation “can entail different levels of engagement, ranging from being informed, to being consulted, or even empowered to suggest solutions or choose among alternatives, with each level corresponding to the extent of the citizen’s power in determining the end product” (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217). It has been found that “while often the program has been successful in getting funding to provide the intervention, if the community was not invested or accepting of the intervention, even good ideas were failures” (Edwards et al., 2000) p. 296). Sometimes leadership can help move a group toward readiness. “Competent leadership drives initiative success in achieving the desired vision. If community practitioners are to be effective at their work, becoming a capable leader and influencing others to do so is

the most important intervention in increasing the likelihood that the local initiative will accomplish its goals” (Lempa et al., 2008, p. 314).

In this study, we look at the process of creating farmers market manager networks, their facilitation, member participation, and their value in developing relationships and skills for members of each network to evaluate their potential value for building individual and market capacity.

### Research Setting

The state of Wisconsin was divided into four regions for this study (Figure 1). The northwestern part of the state did not participate in this project. The regions were delineated based on farmers market density, yielding a similar number of markets in each geographical area.

Unpublished data from a statewide survey ( $N = 174$ ) in 2022 by University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension in cooperation with the Wisconsin Farmers Market Association (WFMA) provides an overview of the more than 300 farmers markets in the state. Half (50%) of the markets are run independently without external financial or administrative support. The remaining markets fall into four categories: 36% economic development associations (downtown business associations, chambers of commerce, or business improvement districts); 27% municipalities; 13% not-for-profits (external to the market); and 10% for-profit businesses. The remaining markets (14%) were not clearly categorized. Over half of the farmers markets have 35 or fewer vendors and charge less than US\$100 to each vendor per market season.

Farmers markets in Wisconsin have struggled with high rates of manager turnover. Based on statewide farmers market surveys conducted by Extension in 2003 and 2018, the average market manager in Wisconsin has three to five years of experience. Few receive mentoring or legacy documents before taking on the role, and the majority are unpaid or poorly compensated. Most market managers are unpaid (59%) and of those who are paid, most receive US\$15–25 per hour. In the transition, many markets are left to start from scratch and struggle with the expectations of vendors and customers for things to be the same as under the previous manager. Creating regional farmers mar-

ket networks, to allow for mentoring, support, and collaboration, may help to increase manager longevity and market sustainability.

## Methods

### *The Process of Creating Networks*

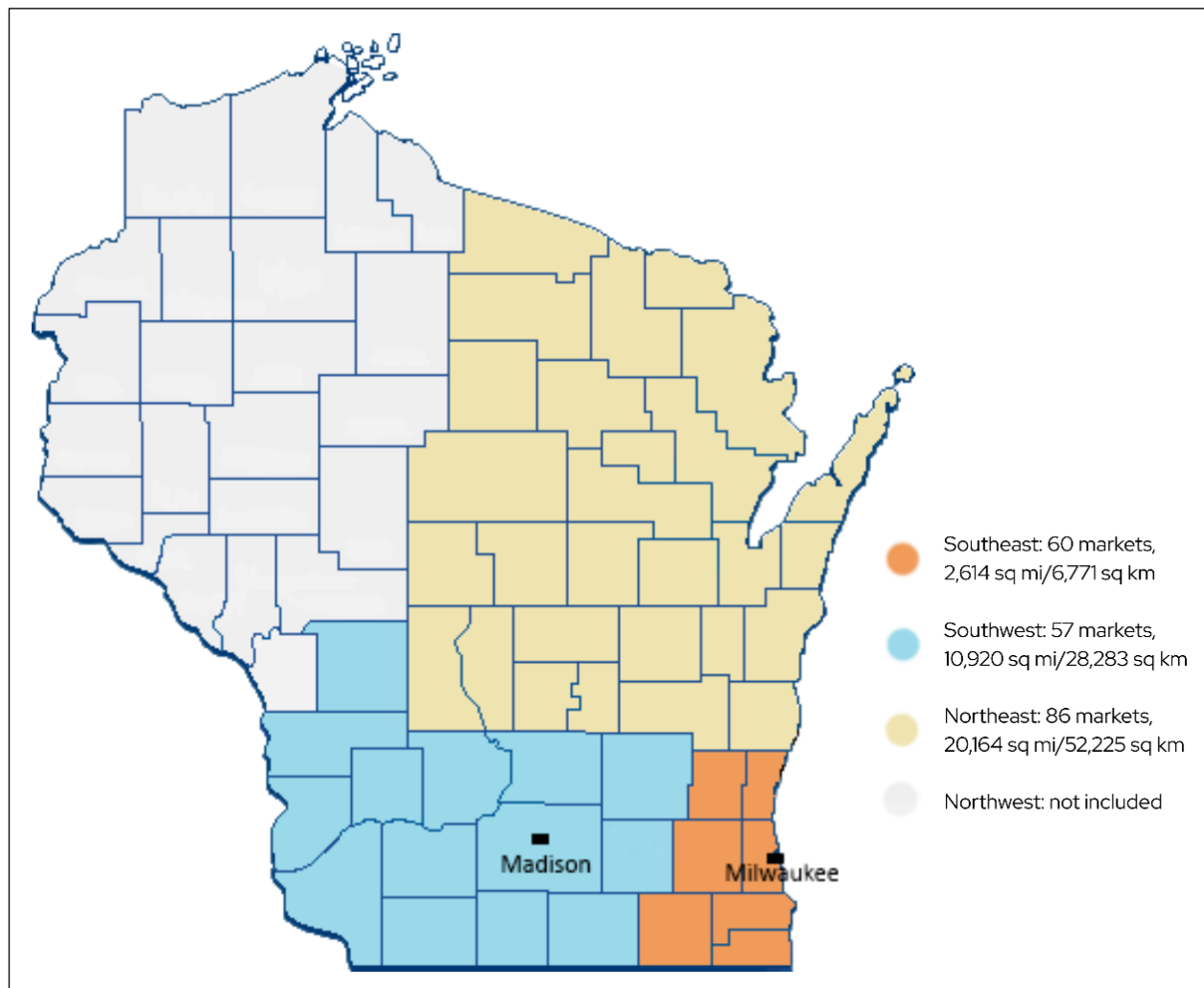
Three farmers market manager coordinators were hired by Extension, using grant funding, and charged with updating the state's farmers market listings, conducting surveys, and facilitating regional farmers market networks. Each coordinator lived in the area being coordinated and had earlier experience with farmers markets, as a vendor, manager, or both.

To build the regional networks, coordinators

were initially tasked with finding all farmers markets in their respective regions. The initial list provided by the WFMA included information for over 300 markets. Attempts were made to contact all farmers markets listed by phone, email, or in person. Additional markets were added to the list, and those not currently in operation were removed. During the update, each coordinator introduced themselves to the market manager, explained their role, and provided basic information about the creation of regional farmers market manager networks, the upcoming project, and its goals.

During the winter of 2022–2023, each farmers market coordinator hosted an in-person educational workshop for market managers in their region. These workshops included a presentation

**Figure 1. Regional Boundaries for the Four Farmers Market Manager Networks**



on the grant project and a discussion of the goals, expectations, and benefits of taking part in a regional network. A written synopsis and verbal explanation of the project were given to the market managers who expressed interest in learning more, and staff were available to answer questions. Coordinators also reached out to the managers in their region who did not attend the workshop.

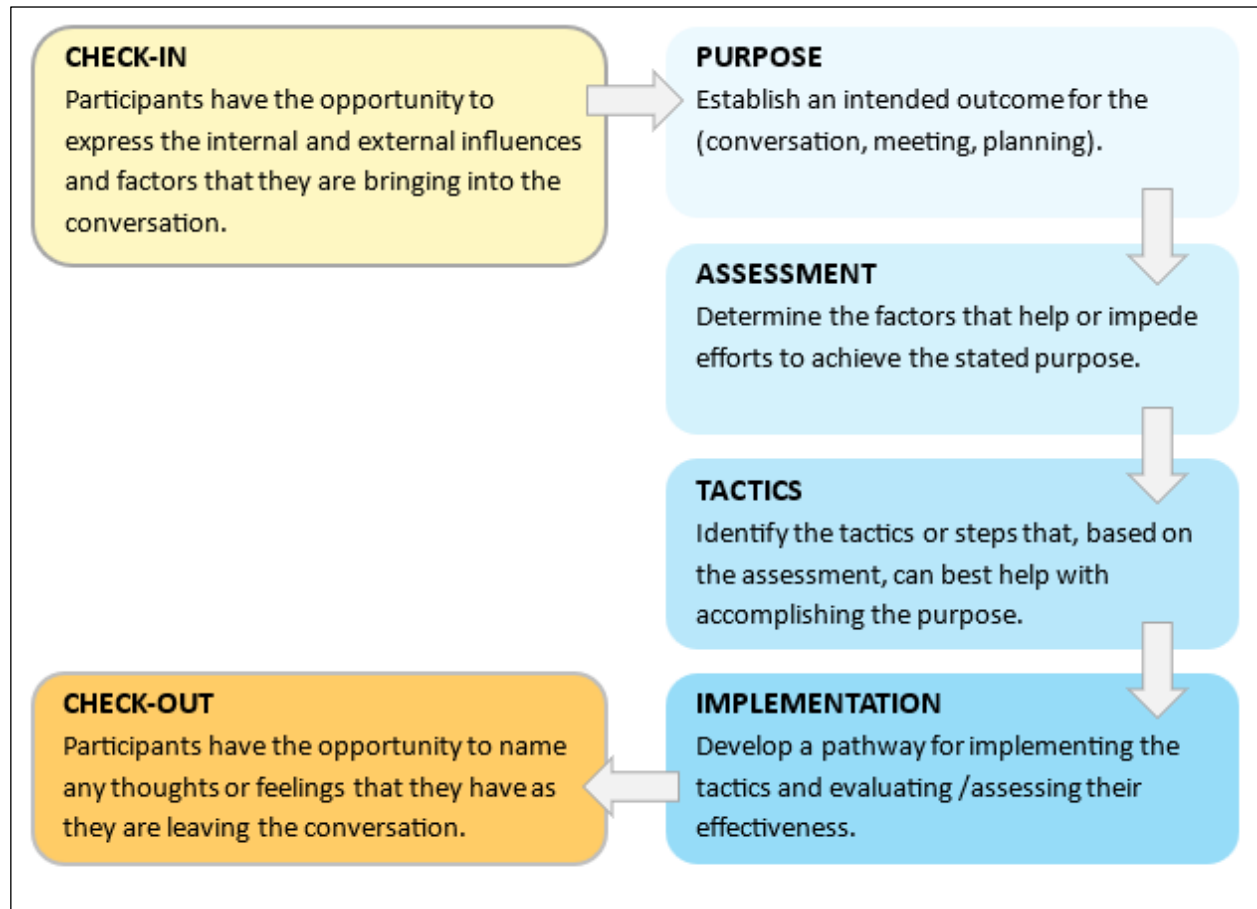
Farmers markets taking part in the study were required to collect data to fulfill the obligations of the grant funding. At a minimum, markets needed to identify the number and types of agricultural vendors at their markets, collect sales data for the agricultural producers (including value added) taking part in the market, and provide a minimum of two customer attendance counts per market season. Participating markets were required to collect this data for three years.

Once market networks were formed, coordinators met with manager groups to establish connections among the participants. The first phase of the project was helping managers with baseline data collection and entry. Then a group-needs assessment was conducted to help market managers find a common project on which managers in the network would collaborate with the goal of increasing vendor sales and customer counts at participating markets.

### *The Regional Network Project Process*

The PATI (Purpose, Assessment, Tactics, Implementation) Framework (Figure 2), an organizational tool created by Dr. Annie Jones, University of Wisconsin Extension Organizational Developments and Tribal Nations Specialist (2020), was used by networks in deciding each group's project.

**Figure 2. Steps of the PATI Framework (Created by Dr. Annie Jones, University of Wisconsin Division of Extension, 2020)**



The PATI Framework was adapted from the Medicine Wheel logic model, which combines the traditional teachings of Indigenous communities with the planning and evaluation of the logic model, which is used to create a visual display of the relationships among resources, the activities you plan, and the changes or results you hope to achieve. This tool combines strengths from both of these models to provide a broad and comprehensive view of a program's components and endeavors to include input from all group participants. The simplicity, efficiency, and transparency of the tool make it easy for participants to follow.

Regional coordinators were trained in the facilitation of this tool and were provided with weekly troubleshooting check-in meetings to talk through individual network approaches and challenges. They were also provided with the support of a local Extension community development educator experienced in using the PATI Framework. The support educator attended the network meetings and helped with facilitation as requested by the coordinator. In addition to facilitating, coordinators taught network members the framework for use in future projects.

Using the PATI Framework, each network identified a collaborative project and was allocated up to US\$12,000, with the potential of additional dollars being available in year two (pending actual grant expenditures). No funding could be used to pay market staff for routine or ongoing market efforts. To help market managers develop their grant-writing and budgeting skills, each market network developed a project description and two-year budget with the guidance of the regional coordinator. Each of the three networks chose a different project aimed at increasing visitor counts and vendor sales. The Southwest network chose a branded grassroots marketing campaign including recipe cards, social media marketing, and market-specific video development. The Southeast group developed a "Taste It Tent" at which each market encouraged healthy eating, promoted vendor products, and hosted cooking demonstrations. The Northeast network used a regional promotion strategy that used Saturday morning local television spots and print ads in regional publications to promote their network. Projects were reviewed for

alignment with grant rules and feasibility. Once approved, networks were able to move forward with their projects.

### *Process Evaluation*

One follow-up survey using Qualtrics was conducted for all participating markets in the three network regions during year two of the project. The farmers market manager or the person from the organization most engaged in the project was surveyed. (Not all respondents were engaged in the entire project.) The questions focused on the markets' experience with the PATI Framework process, their level of engagement, and the impact of their participation. Managers were not required to complete any individual question in the survey. The percentages listed are based on the number of managers that completed each question.

## **Results**

### *Southwest Regional Network*

The Southwest region included 57 farmers markets over 10,044 square miles (16,164 sq. km), of which nine joined the regional network, two in smaller urban areas and seven in areas classified as rural. Participating markets were widely distributed, their distance from each other ranging from 12–119 miles (19–192 km). All markets had a market manager who was paid as part of a more comprehensive position or was otherwise compensated for managing the market. There was an existing coalition of five farmers markets, all of which chose to take part in the study, in this region prior to the initiation of the grant. With the involvement of the coordinator, additional markets were recruited to be a part of the network.

### *Southeast Regional Network*

The Southeast area of the state is overall more urban than the rest of the state. It includes the greater Milwaukee area, including extensive suburbs, and the Milwaukee-to-Chicago corridor, which is more densely populated than other areas of the state. It includes 60 farmers markets over 2,614 square miles (4,207 sq. km). Although this area has the greatest density of farmers markets, the network was composed of only four geograph-

ically clustered urban markets ranging in distance from one another by 6–32 mi (10–51 km). Initially, six markets had committed to participating; however, after the original coordinator left the position at the end of the first year, four of these markets decided not to take part. When the position was rehired, two new markets were recruited, bringing the network to four markets. Three of the four market managers were paid positions, and one was a volunteer.

### ***Northeast Regional Network***

The Northeast region of the state encompasses the largest geographical area, 21,040 square miles (33,861 sq. km). Markets were more geographically dispersed, with distances between markets ranging from 1–169 mi (1–272 km). This network was also the largest with 10 markets taking part, three in smaller urban areas and seven in rural areas. All managers in this network were paid. One of the locations hosts both a Sunday and a Wednesday farmers market; data was treated separately for these events.

### ***The PATI Framework***

Southwest Regional Network: Due to the distance between markets and the demands of different managers' obligations, they were unable to find time to meet in person. Therefore, this group of markets took part in the PATI Framework virtually. The group met three times to work toward a project consensus. Market managers in this group focused primarily on how their individual markets would benefit from the project and spent less time discussing ideas that would help all network markets. Multiple markets wanted the mini-grant funding (US\$12,000 per network) to be divided up among the network markets to manage individually. One market manager expressed this perspective so strongly that it was difficult for all the managers' voices to be heard and considered. The regional coordinator continually brought the group back to the purpose of the network and the affiliated funding. After using various techniques to create a space where all managers' voices could be heard and they could focus on eligible projects, the process was shifted to an online survey in Qualtrics. Although this approach differed from the

other groups, it was consistent with the PATI Framework. Valuable input was gathered in the survey from managers who had not voiced their ideas at earlier meetings. Once the survey results were collected and analyzed, the group was provided with the results, and another virtual meeting was held to discuss the results and decide the group project. The process resulted in a project that was quasi-collaborative, with managers creating common goals for their network marketing project that included the development of videos and shared promotional resources like recipe cards, but that used the resources independently in ways that suited each individual market best.

Southeast Regional Network: The proximity of the markets and the managers allowed for their PATI Framework process to be conducted in person. Although the group was made up of four individuals with strong initiative and leadership skills, the conversation was well balanced, with space for all managers to speak. The group arrived at a tentative consensus by the end of the first meeting with little help from the PATI facilitator or the regional coordinator. Once the group agreed to their network project, the creation of a "Taste It Tent" at each market, the members quickly moved on from their own individual ideas. They reconvened soon after to complete the plan and discuss responsibilities and options for individual market customization. Network members were able to tweak the project, with the input and consent of other network members, to meet the unique needs of their markets without drifting from the initial proposal concept. This group needed the least amount of guidance during the process and moved through the steps of the framework with little direction. They were able to voluntarily assume tasks related to the project in a balanced way that allowed the members to use their strengths (gathering information, writing, budgeting, organization) in preparing the grant proposal. Group members brought their contributions back to the group to review and submit. All group members remained engaged for all three years of the project and were involved in unified branding as the Southeast WI Farmers Market Collaborative.

Northeast Regional Network: The members of

this network met both in-person and virtually. Their first meeting (in-person) included introductions and an overview of the project. Network members had a chance to meet the other managers and engage in conversation in advance of introducing the PATI Framework. Managers were asked to consider possible project ideas before the next meeting. At the next meeting, held virtually, the framework was explained and the process started. The farmers market coordinator and the educator supporting the facilitation of the PATI Framework both played a significant part in the process. This group met three times to identify their project, once in person and twice virtually, with not all members able to attend every meeting. Ultimately, this group decided to pursue a regional marketing campaign to increase vendor sales and the number of market attendees. Network markets were featured on Saturday morning newscasts for the area and print advertisements in regional local food-focused publications.

### Follow-Up Evaluation Survey

Of the 23 farmers markets that took part in the three networks, 17 returned the survey, which included 11 questions (Table 1). Of the six farmers markets that did not return the survey, four were

under new management that no longer wished to be involved in the project, and two failed to return any communication via email or by phone during the final months of project funding. The number of respondents for each question ranges from 15–17. The categories of *strongly agree* and *somewhat agree* were considered positive responses for the analysis and *somewhat disagree* and *strongly disagree* were considered negative responses.

Overall, market managers believed the PATI Framework was useful in helping the managers determine the group projects (88%) and that the process (86%) and the decisions made (88%) as a result of the process were both manager-led. The perceived value of the Extension facilitator ranged widely, with 62% of managers agreeing that the person’s involvement was helpful, 19% neither agreed or disagreed, and 19% didn’t know. The facilitator’s role varied substantially from one regional group to another. The Southeast group requested minor support from their facilitator, and the Southwest and Northeast facilitators were substantially involved in the decision-making process. Some managers surveyed, however, were not present for one or more meetings where the PATI Framework was used.

Comments on the process included:

**Table 1. Model Effectiveness and Facilitation Manager Survey Results**

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	I Don't Know
The PATI Framework was useful in helping to determine our group’s project.	8 (50%)	6 (38%)	1 (6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (6%)
I had the opportunity to share my ideas with the group during these planning sessions.	11 (69%)	4 (25%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (6%)
The farmers market managers led the direction of the discussion.	11 (73%)	2 (13%)	0 (0%)	1 (7%)	0 (0%)	1 (7%)
My Outreach Coordinator was effective in facilitating these discussions.	13 (76%)	3 (18%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (6%)
The person assisting facilitation was helpful in the process.	5 (31%)	5 (31%)	3 (19%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (19%)
At the time it was selected, I felt the project would be valuable to my market.	10 (63%)	5 (31%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (6%)
There was a group consensus among managers when the final mini grant project was chosen.	12 (75%)	2 (13%)	1 (6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (6%)

It was great to meet other community representatives and work together. While we were in different locations, with different needs, we were able to have consensus.

The facilitator really struggled with our group. We were too different in market needs and geography. We had one manager that just spoke over everyone, and the group seemed to go around and around.

Another metric measured was engagement (Table 2). Three questions were asked about the market manager’s participation in writing the proposal. Most managers took part in one or more aspects of the process (69% proposal writing, 88% gathering information for the proposal, and 75% engaging in budget creating).

Because the managers were not paid by the grant for their time, questions were asked to evaluate how they valued their time spent taking part in the project (Table 3). Most managers responded

that the process and project were a good use of their time (65% strongly agree, 25% somewhat agree). The survey also asked if the project was valuable to their market, vendors, and customers. Most managers responded that they strongly agreed (69% market, 69% vendors, and 69% customers).

The likelihood of managers because of this experience engaging in the future with other managers or organizations without assured funding was also measured (Table 4). Managers either strongly or somewhat agreed that they are likely to take part in future collaborations with other farmers markets (100%), start a project with other farmers markets (88%), or apply for grant funding for their market or a group of markets (94%). Managers also said that because of their experience with the regional network, they were likely to continue collecting data about their market (94%) and reach out to other market managers for information or advice in the future (94%).

**Table 2. Manager Engagement Survey Results**

	Helped/contributed to this effort.	Did not participate in this part of the proposal.
How did you help in writing the mini-grant proposal?	11 (69%)	5 (31%)
How did you help gather information?	14 (88%)	2 (12%)
How did you assist in creating the budget for the proposal?	12 (75%)	4 (25%)

**Table 3. Perceived Benefits Manager Survey Results**

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	I Don't Know
The project coordinator supported my efforts during the project.	15 (94%)	0 (0%)	1 (6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
The project was beneficial to my market.	11 (69%)	4 (25%)	1 (6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
The project benefited my market vendors.	11 (69%)	3 (19%)	1 (6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (6%)
The project benefited my market customers.	11 (69%)	2 (13%)	1 (6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (13%)
My participation in the project was a good use of my time.	11 (69%)	4 (25%)	1 (6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

## Discussion

Farmers markets in Wisconsin traditionally have not been well resourced. Most get by using donations, sponsorships, and vendor fees to fund a complex and vital operation that spurs economic development, increases access to healthy food, and builds community. In some areas of the state, markets are supported through local government and not-for-profit agencies. However, as local, state, and federal government budgets shrink and grants become less available, the support structure in place for farmers markets weakens (Kirwan, 2025; Metz & Scherer, 2022; Sullivan, 2025). In lieu of adequate external funding, increased capacity and support must come from within the farmers market, local food, and food access communities.

As an example of developing internal support, this study sought funding to explore the value of creating regional farmers market networks. Research has shown the value of fostering collaborative relationships among managers. Dollahite et al. (2005) found that “prior to the collaboration initiative, stakeholders worked either in isolation or in one-on-one partnerships. As a result, there was little or no capacity-building among partners or within communities. Protecting one’s turf sometimes stood in the way of innovative strategies to address barriers to farmers markets and to other community food security issues” (p. 351).

The goal of creating networks was to help markets connect and set up persistent groups of market managers that would serve as a knowledge

resource, support group, and collaborative space for managers, as a network “provides a constructive and efficient forum for dialogue” (Porter, 2000, p. 18). New managers could cycle in as others left, creating continuity and consistency for farmers markets, which would be especially valuable in Wisconsin due to the high rate of manager turnover. However, Campbell (2010) found that bringing people to the table is essential, but not quite enough; diverse sets of stakeholders are more likely to get and stay involved if they find a supportive environment that allows them to influence the process from the beginning, by contributing to setting goals and agendas.

With this understanding, the initiative included funding for each network to engage in a joint project that would benefit all markets in the network. The purpose of these endeavors was to help build the skills of the managers in the network to work together to seek funding and create initiatives. The best solution, arguably, is to envisage arrangements that guarantee some immediate impact within a long-term strategy, because the short-term benefits help reassure and motivate participants and increase trust in the process while the long-term approach makes it possible to develop effective (citizen) involvement (Agranoff, 2006). By working together and replicating their work at multiple markets, managers would not have to complete the work alone. They would share skills, allowing managers to use their strengths and lean on other managers to compensate for their deficits. By

**Table 4. Expected Future Network Participation Manager Survey**

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	I Don't Know
Participate in future projects involving multiple farmers markets.	11 (69%)	5 (31%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Initiate a project with multiple markets.	10 (63%)	4 (25%)	2 (13%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Apply for grant funding for your market or a group of markets.	9 (56%)	6 (38%)	1 (6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Contact other market managers for information or advice.	12 (75%)	3 (19%)	1 (6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Adopt or continue collecting data about the market.	12 (71%)	3 (18%)	2 (12%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Apply the things that I have learned in other areas.	11 (69%)	5 (31%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

learning a process for group decision making and taking part in bringing a project to fruition, managers would experience the value of the network and continue the collaborative work into the future without external prompting or support.

Once farmers markets decided that they had the capacity to fulfill the grant reporting requirements, regional coordinators began building relationships with the managers and between them through virtual and in-person meetings. The value of the initial meetings of introduction was to help participants to see that they “share many common needs, opportunities, constraints, and obstacles to productivity” because the “extent to which participants see themselves benefitting from working collaboratively toward a common goal is crucial to formation and development” (Porter, 2000, p. 32).

Various processes were considered for determining projects. Research has shown that a “structured approach to decision making is essential to facilitate inclusion, thus improving the chances of a more systematic impact” (Ianniello et al., 2019, p. 35) and that the process design is critical for the success of participation, particularly in relation to the choice of implementation tools of dialogue and the dynamics of involvement; confused definitions of engagement mechanisms and little understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of different methods may jeopardize the outcome of the participation initiative (Yang & Pandey, 2011). The PATI Framework was chosen for its simplicity, transparency, and focus on having all voices heard. Having originated within the organization and been used successfully for 15 years meant that Extension had experienced facilitators to support the framework. The process was also an efficient method of reaching group consensus in deciding upon the network project while prioritizing that all manager voices were heard. As farmers market managers have many obligations, it was important that the process was perceived to be a valuable use of their time.

The value of the regional network groups was evaluated at the end of the grants funding period. (With the high turnover rate of managers in Wisconsin, collecting the survey data while the managers that took part in the project remained in their positions was a priority.) In the follow-up survey,

market managers responded favorably to the PATI Framework. Although one regional group encountered some difficulties, most managers were supportive of the coordinators and facilitators of the PATI Framework and the determination of the network project. The process allowed for the flexibility of engaging market managers in diverse ways, allowing for the use of an online survey when conversations were ineffective.

It was also important that the market managers felt ownership of the project and its results, because “shared goals represent the degree to which the network members share a common understanding and approach to the achievement of tasks and results” (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005, p. 153). Managers responded that they believed strongly or very strongly that the managers led the discussion, had the opportunity to share their thoughts during the discussions, and that the group had reached a joint decision when choosing the network project.

Once the group projects were identified, the regional coordinator guided the writing and submission of the network’s proposal and budget. This step was an informal indication of each market manager’s engagement in the project. Morton and Tobias (1997) found that the first impediment to success was that not all stakeholders were interested in taking part, and “having all interested and affected stakeholders involved in a dependable partnership, committed in time and effort, is essential for true collaboration and innovative outcomes” (Dollahite et al., 2005, p. 352). The network survey found that most managers took part in one or more aspects of preparing the proposal, including gathering information, proposal writing, and budgeting. The impact of the network projects was also positive. Market managers felt that their participation was an effective use of time and that there was a positive impact on their market, vendors, and customers.

All managers taking part in the survey indicated that they were likely to remain engaged with the network after the completion of the project. They also gained skills from this process that they plan to use in the future. Although all groups successfully completed their projects, the strength of the network and their future capacity for independence varied. Trust is a vital part of sustaining a

functional network. Multiple studies have highlighted its value: “closed networks, where direct ties are also tied to each other generate trust” (Brass et al., 2004, p. 805) and “trust plays a key role in the willingness of actors in the network to transfer confidential knowledge” (Garcia-Villaverde et al., 2018, p. 536). Trust engenders the sharing of knowledge, which makes membership in a network valuable.

Trust was built to a different extent within each group. The smallest, the Southeast Regional Network, was the most successful. Some of their success in creating an effective network and project is because of the trusting relationships that were created. Hermans et al. (2017) argues that “through social interactions, individuals exchange information, communicate with each other over network channels, and create new knowledge that can culminate into innovation” (p. 4). The four markets in the Southeast regional network were urban, geographically close, and interacted with each other regularly with ease, including occasional social gatherings. Network diffusion is amplified by the similarity of social, organizational, or strategic characteristics of organizations because the managers in adopting organizations see similar organizations as more relevant and easier to learn from (Ahuja & Katila, 2001). They were also able to reach a higher level of mutuality, consistent with the finding that “when compared to the group exhibiting coordination (the lowest degree of collaboration) [a] group exhibited more confidence, reported increased confidence, reported trust among partners, seemed energized by each success, and clearly aspired to greater achievement” (Dollahite et al., 2005, p. 351).

Less cohesiveness and comradery were seen in the other regional groups, perhaps due to network size and geography. The Northeast and Southwest groups were further apart and met as a group primarily through virtual meetings. The ability of these groups to form a trust-based “closed network” was not helped by using virtual and individual manager meetings to the same extent that the Southeast group relied on small in-person group meetings. As networks persist, more manager-to-manager connections may form and increase trust to build a more sustainable and functional network.

The extent to which each group was coached, rather than supported or led, by their regional coordinator also varied. This position was developed to connect network managers for mutual support and to facilitate manager skills and confidence in seeking, applying for, and managing outside funding. Regional coordinators from Southwest Regional Network and Northeast regional network met more often individually with market managers to provide individual coaching and troubleshooting for customer counts, sales data collection, and entry. The development of this relationship, rather than relationships with other network members, positioned the coordinator as a resource person instead of a coach. This limited the transfer of knowledge within the group and the building of skills to foster independence. Instead of making the need for a coordinator obsolete, it created dependency. Upon completion of the grant, the network was expected to continue to function for the good of the members without externally funded staff. However, the type of support provided by the coordinators for these two regions motivated desire by the coordinator and the network members to find continued funding for these positions, consistent with the finding that “if community practitioners are to be effective in their work, becoming a capable leader and influencing others to do so is the most important intervention to increase the likelihood that the local initiative will accomplish its goals” (Lempa et al., 2008, p. 314). However, “underperforming clusters have a chronic need for support” (Giuliani et al., 2019, p. 152).

Overall, the use of farmers market manager networks shows potential to create a level of regional farmers market self-sufficiency. Most managers engaged in this project, including those who are volunteers, thought that even with many other job responsibilities, their time was well spent. Managers were able to build their skills and their confidence in working collaboratively with other markets and see the value of continuing to work with the network in the future. They also found value in the connections made and viewed other managers as resources that they could continue to utilize. The initial creation and mentoring of these networks has been a key part of their empower-

ment. Without help, it is unlikely that manager networks will come together on their own to fulfill this role. Allocating funding and mentoring the initial formation of manager networks has up-front costs but may reduce some of the dependence on long-term external funding.

The ability of the Southwest regional network and Northeast regional network groups to persist without coordinator support is yet unknown. Managers in both groups indicated that they intended to continue but no future meetings are currently scheduled. However, the Southeast regional network continues to thrive, having added members and embarked on a new regional initiative to increase farmers market sales with private business-funded gift certificates. Additional follow-up with network members will be done to evaluate the persistence and evolution of these groups one year after the original survey, when the value of other surveys will be assessed.

To optimize the potential and value of regional networks, more research is needed. For Wisconsin, the mentoring of managers and relationships that takes place in networks is an important focus. Will the support of a community of managers help to increase manager tenure? Additionally, assessing the value of in-person versus virtual meetings in creating trust and facilitating resource sharing among farmers markets is needed. This work would include assessing the proportion of in-person/virtual meetings recommended to optimize network functioning. Further investigating the value of grouping markets into networks by size, market structure or funding model (e.g., municipal or stand-alone) may also help find ways to increase network effectiveness. Ultimately, the goal is to improve the sustainability of support, capacity and success of farmers market managers to better aid farmers markets and local agriculture, and the communities they serve.

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