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Social, cultural, political, and human capital perceptions by young food system professionals

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Abstract

The Community Capitals (CCs) model has been applied to numerous food systems and community development efforts. This paper utilizes the CCs framework to understand how it informs the operations of food system organizations in Vermont. We focus on four capitals without clear units of measurement: social, human, cultural, and political. These capitals have been highlighted in previous research as being less commonly and easily identified by food systems stakeholders. We conducted interviews with 10 early-career professionals across the state. The purpose of the inquiry was to measure how our respondents understand these capitals and how they underpin the respondents' work. Questions focused on how respondents and their organizations define and operationalize these four

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capitals and their roles in food resilience. Respondents emphasized the value of investing in collaborative relationships, recognizing experiential knowledge, supporting advocacy efforts, and actively addressing equity concerns. This study contributes to a broader understanding of how CCs support resilient food systems. Future research could further explore how to address diversity gaps in food system networks and promote collaboration.

Keywords
food resilience, community capitals, stakeholders, Vermont

Introduction

Food systems play a critical role in supporting human well-being, livelihoods, and essential life-supporting services (Vroegindewey & Hodbod, 2018). However, food systems are vulnerable to political, natural, and economic disruptions that can have far-reaching effects worldwide (Toth et al., 2016). Building resilience in food systems therefore has become increasingly important, to enable communities to withstand shocks, adapt to changing conditions, and transform when needed.

The Community Capitals (CCs) framework, introduced by Flora et al. (2003) and applied by Emery and Flora (2006), identifies seven forms of capital: natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial, and built (Daniel et al., 2022). Four of these—social, cultural, human, and political capital—may be less tangible and more difficult to measure but play crucial roles in community development and resilience (Mueller et al., 2020). Social capital refers to relationships and networks; cultural capital encompasses shared values and practices; human capital involves skills and knowledge; and political capital relates to power and engagement in decision-making. Previous research in Vermont found that stakeholders were better able to identify CC assets that have a clear unit of measurement, for example, financial (dollars), built (square feet), natural (acres), and clear means of investment (Conner et al., 2023). Our work complements previous findings and extends their insights.

Vermont provides an interesting case study for examining food system resilience through the lens of CCs. The state is nationally recognized for its vibrant local food movement and innovative food policies (Olson, 2019). Initiatives like Farm to Plate have significantly promoted local food consumption and sustainable farming practices (Farm to Plate, n.d.). However, Vermont faces challenges including rising food insecurity, farm viability pressures, demographic shifts, and climate change impacts (Rortvedt, n.d.). While the CCs framework has been applied to understand food systems in other regions (Stone et al., 2024), there is a lack of research on how it can contribute specifically to building Vermont's food system resilience.

This study aims to address this gap by assessing how these four capitals (social, cultural, human, and political) can contribute to building resilience in Vermont's food system, by examining the perceptions of early-career professionals in local food systems organizations. The findings illuminate how different forms of CC operate in practice to support or hinder food system resilience. Our research contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of CCs in food system resilience and offers practical insights for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners working to strengthen local food systems.

Literature Review

This literature review examines the relationship between community capitals and food system resilience, with particular attention to social, cultural, human, and political capital. We first review the concept of food system resilience and the Community Capitals framework, followed by literature on each of the four capitals and how they have been conceptualized and measured. We then identify gaps in the existing literature that inform the focus of this study.

Community Capitals and Food Resilience

Resilience is seen both as a process and an outcome (Manyena, 2006). Herrmann and colleagues (2011) referred to resilience as "positive adaptation despite experiencing adversity" (p. 259), and as the ability of a system to sustain itself through change by adaptation and occasional transformation (Magis, 2010). Accordingly, when a system can adapt to changes, it is said to be persistent or resili-

ent (Egamberdiev, 2024).

In the event of a disaster, resilience measures a community's capability of restoring the original predisaster state as well as coping with emerging postdisaster situations and changes (Kais & Islam, 2016). Resilience efforts often emphasize longer-term preventative measures rather than short-term beneficial responses, such as enacting policy interventions and strategies that promote well-being and successful adaptation (Egamberdiev, 2024).

Food System Resilience

Understanding food system resilience is crucial because food, nutritional outcomes, livelihoods, and many other essential life-supporting services are derived from food systems (Vroegindewey & Hodbod, 2018). In Vermont, interest in local food systems is growing, and efforts to establish adaptive governance to support action are increasing (Skog et al., 2018). As a state that is "home to many local food initiatives" (Whitehouse et al., 2023, p. 203), Vermont boasts the highest national spending per capita on direct-to-consumer sales (Olson, 2019). The Farm to Plate initiative, launched in 2009, has been a significant driver of Vermont's food system development. The initiative aims to increase economic development and jobs in the farm and food sectors while improving access to healthy local food for all Vermonters, which has greatly contributed to promoting local food consumption and supporting sustainable farming practices (Farm to Plate, n.d.). Vermont's food system also has a positive employment impact on other sectors of the economy, with a 2.8% increase in employment in food systems in the year 2023 (Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, 2024).

Community Capitals Model

The more easily measured CCs—built, financial, and natural capitals—refer, respectively, to a community's physical infrastructure (e.g., homes, factories, transportation); its material property, wealth, and other financial sources that can be invested in the community; and the availability and sustainable use of natural resources for human consumption (Flora, 2018). Our study focuses on the remaining CCs, which refer to less tangible assets that are mainly found in the social structure of communities, and are typically expressed through interpersonal connections, cultural standards, and informal networks (Mueller et al., 2020). Social capital is the size and density of social networks within a community. Cultural capital is the community's worldview, values, traditions, and norms. Human capital includes a person's natural and acquired personal qualities, such as job experience, education, knowledge, and health, that support one's capacity to make a living and build community (Nosratabadi et al., 2020). Finally, political capital is community members' ability to access resources, power, and power agents (Kais & Islam, 2016). Importantly, these four capitals are often overlooked by stakeholders engaged in strengthening food system resilience (Conner et al., 2023).

Social Capital

Social capital represents the relationships among people in society (Egamberdiev, 2024; Whitham, 2012). Researchers have argued that social capital is important for building food system resilience by promoting connections both within and outside the community (Aldrich, 2017; Glowacki-Dudka et al., 2013). Social capital can be seen as the benefits derived from the interaction between different networks and groups, such as resources created in human networks with common norms that facilitate social transactions and achieving societal goals for members, and community belonging (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011). Another study (Cramm et al., 2013) defines social capital and social cohesion as resources accessible to individuals through their affiliation with a group or community, such as shared norms of give-and-take, involvement in community activities, confidence in others, and the advantages of being part of a group.

Social capital serves as a potential element for enhancing resilience (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015). Social capital can contribute to food security through the synergy that is created from the interrelationship among community members at the various stages of the food supply chain from production to consumption (Nosratabadi et al., 2020). In building resilience, examining social capital provides insight into the complexity and dynamics a community faces at times of disruption (Roque et al., 2020). According to Aldrich & Meyer (2015),

strengthening social infrastructure such as social capital can be an approach to predisaster mitigation, which affects the recovery process and contributes to community resilience. Social capital can increase access to the information, resources, capital, and expertise needed to promote development (Roque et al., 2020), and can function as a gap-filler when governments and markets fall short (Aldrich, 2015).

The development of resilience capacity is closely tied to the empowerment of individuals through collective actions and social dynamics; the relationship between social capital and resilience is not one-sided, but instead flows both ways (Egamberdiev, 2024; Fischer & McKee, 2017; Hayward, 2013). For example, *bonding* social capital strengthens local ties, while *bridging* social capital extends these connections to external networks, thereby enhancing resource access and collaboration (Furness et al., 2022; Spring et al., 2018). In Vermont, initiatives that promote community supported agriculture have demonstrated how social capital can lead to transformative changes in food systems, which enable communities to adapt to challenges and leverage collective resources (Furness et al., 2022).

Measuring Social Capital. Scholars emphasize the need for social capital to create agency and inspire community action and civic engagement (Beaulieu, 2014; Butler Flora & Bregendahl, 2012; Fey et al., 2006). Previous studies have measured social capital as relationships and networks of trust, reciprocity, equity, inclusions and belonging, which are measured by number, strength, diversity, and longevity of links between different types of organizations (Beaulieu, 2014; Butler Flora & Bregendahl, 2012; Dale & Newman, 2010; Emery & Flora, 2006; Fey et al., 2006; Flora, 1998).

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital is viewed as a community's beliefs, customs, attitudes, values, and behavior (Hale et al., 2023). It can be referred to as creative industries and amenities; a distinct social group; knowledge, values, attitudes, norms, and beliefs; and place-based characteristics. Ohashi and colleagues (2017) delved into the concept of cultural capital in the context of public health; they identified *autogenic ability*, the capacity to adapt and self-manage in response to daily challenges, as a key attribute of cultural capital. Applied to food systems, autogenic ability reflects a community's capacity to rely on internal strengths, local knowledge, and shared cultural practices to navigate disruptions. Communities with strong cultural capital often rely on themselves and draw from local resources, which helps them enhance their capacity to respond to disruptions in global food systems. Vermont's food system has been promoted by local and national media outlets as having a vibrant culture (Burros, 2008; Charles, 2011; Olson, 2019).

The notion of cultural capital was originally developed by Pierre Bourdieu (Ohashi et al., 2017), who asserted that it "can exist in three forms" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). These refer to: (1) the "embodied state ... of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body"; (2) "the objectified state ... of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.)" that people produce; and (3) "the institutionalized state" of markers such as "educational qualifications" (Bourdieu, 1986, p.243). Thus, cultural capital can be observed in individuals, materials, and broader systems and organizations that may confer, enact, and enable cultural capital.

Goulding (2008) views cultural capital as a set of cultural competencies that is needed for effective understanding and participation in cultural activities that are recognized and rewarded by the education system, thereby giving access to social and economic advancement, and reproducing existing class divisions. Closing these diversity gaps requires intentional strategies that go beyond initial inclusion efforts (Roberson, 2019). In Vermont, local cultural values inform food production and consumption practices, which contribute to a more resilient food system (Olson, 2019). By integrating cultural elements with new knowledge and practices, communities can create food systems that are not only sustainable but also reflective of their unique identities (Spring et al., 2023). Further, integrating local knowledge and practices can enhance food security and promote ecological sustainability (Sidiq et al., 2022).

Measuring Cultural Capital. Previous research has measured cultural capital via shared

values and history, volunteerism, language, symbols, and beliefs, including material expressions such as art, clothing, and books, and efforts to preserve or sustain cultural practices like festivals, museums, and other cultural events (Beaulieu, 2014; Butler Flora & Bregendahl, 2012; Fey et al., 2006; Lundgren & Nilsson, 2023).

Human Capital

Human capital is the set of knowledge, skills, and experience that workers have in the economy (Gruzina et al., 2021; Subramony et al., 2018). Human capital influences economic growth and can contribute to the development of an economy by increasing the knowledge and skills of its people, conditional upon the presence of supportive economic and institutional environments (Ali et al., 2018). Human capital is increasingly recognized as a pivotal factor in sustainable economic development (Astachova, 2023). Developing human capital increases workers' productivity while at the same time increasing capacity in other areas of life, such as health, education, and employment (Li et al., 2017).

High levels of human capital can enable economies to innovate and diversify, mitigating the risks of overreliance on specific sectors that may lead to cyclical downturns (Astachova, 2023; Goloshchapova et al., 2023). Resilient food systems require human capital for building more effective knowledge systems (Cash et al., 2003; Danish et al., 2019; Gruzina et al., 2021).

Measuring Human Capital. Previous research has measured human capital as knowledge and skill development and management capacity, youth retention in education, and investments in health, education, and institutional frameworks. At the more macro level, it can be measured by health outcomes, productivity, and crime and employment rates (Butler Flora & Bregendahl, 2012; Deller et al., 2001; Fey et al., 2006).

Political Capital

Political capital relates to power, representation and engagement, resource allocation, and organization (Panzarella et al., 2023). Political skill is essential for effective organizational operations like securing resources and exerting influence to achieve favorable outcomes (Mintzberg, 1985; Perrewé et al., 2000; W. Wang et al., 2024b). Effective leaders continuously invest political capital in ways that yield the greatest return (Kjaer, 2013). For example, according to Liu and colleagues (2013), firms with executives who have political connections have a higher chance of getting approval and market premiums for an initial public offering.

Political connections and support are essential in the success and sustainability of Vermont's food systems. The Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Fund, for example, has distributed millions of dollars in grant funding to food and agriculture projects, a process that often benefits from political advocacy and alignment with state-level priorities (Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets, n.d.). The state's commitment to promoting local agriculture through policies such as the Farm to Plate Initiative exemplifies how political capital can enhance food system resilience (Conner et al., 2023).

Measuring Political Capital. Previous research has measured political capital as a community's ability to influence its policies (via elected officials and other decision-makers) and access to public resources. Measures include numbers of town halls, preponderance of young and women political candidates, communitywide levels of government expenditures, and degree of competitive elections (Beaulieu, 2014; Butler Flora & Bregendahl, 2012; Deller et al., 2001; Emery & Flora, 2006).

Research Gap

The CCs framework has been applied to understand how social, cultural, and human capitals are related to food access and adaptability in U.S. Midwest communities (Crowe & Smith, 2012; Stone et al., 2024). Midwest communities with strong cultural values and social networks were more likely to offer a greater variety of food sources to residents (Crowe & Smith, 2012). During an acute crisis—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—stakeholders regarded human capital as a strong asset despite weaknesses in other community capitals (Stone et al., 2024). There is less research on how CCs contribute to strengthening Vermont's food system. Further, many past studies utilize secondary data

(Deller et al., 2001; Fey et al., 2006) or primary data collected as part of a specific initiative (Butler Flora & Bregendahl, 2012; Emery & Flora, 2006; Lundgren & Nilsson, 2023). This study uses primary data to assess how young professionals in statewide food system organizations understand and operationalize social, cultural, human, and political capital. We focused on young professionals due to Vermont's aging population and its acute need to attract and retain young professionals (Flanders, 2024). The overarching goal of the study is to measure how food systems professionals conceive of and identify these capitals in their organizations, as well as how they describe the impact of the various capitals on their work.

Method

This study used a qualitative research design to examine how food system professionals understand and operationalize social, cultural, human, and political capital in Vermont's food system. The following sections describe the study sample and recruitment process, interview protocol, coding and analysis process, researcher positionality, and steps taken to maintain methodological rigor.

Study Sample and Recruitment

To understand social, cultural, human, and political capital in Vermont's food system, we interviewed key stakeholders ($N = 10$) across different organizations. Interviews provide rich, detailed data, enabling participants to express their perspective in their own words, delving into the why, and how, behind their actions and beliefs (Stuckey, 2013). We conducted interviews in February 2024 over Microsoft Teams; each interview lasted 30–60 minutes. Interview transcripts were automatically generated using Teams and were validated manually using Microsoft Word by the lead author to correct transcription errors. The University of Vermont (UVM) Institutional Review Board (IRB) (STUDY0001698) approved all protocols (recruitment materials, consent information sheet, and interview guide) ' before participant recruitment began.

We recruited participants using a purposive, convenience sampling strategy. A member of the research team who is a faculty member at UVM provided a list of possible interviewees. Most of the interviewees were known to the research team member from prior research interactions, including being former graduate or undergraduate students and/or having collaborated on research projects. Many of the interviewees attended and were introduced to the lead author at the 2023 Farm to Plate annual gathering, a key statewide food systems stakeholder meeting and one in which the CCs model had been previously explored (Conner et al., 2023). The participants' familiarity with the research team and subject matter resulted in ease of recruiting and interviewing; their familiarity does, however, create limitations, which will be discussed below.

The participants are mainly early-career professionals and hold a range of roles in their respective organizations. From our literature review, we found that many researchers gather information from senior leaders of organizations, but we decided to recruit early-career professionals because Vermont's aging population makes their perspectives particularly important and because they are directly involved in the day-to-day operations of their organizations and can provide valuable insights into how organizational policies and norms are implemented in practice. We suspected that, in interviews, senior leaders may be more likely to state the party line or to give answers that make the organization look good, and we were concerned that, like farmers, they may be experiencing survey fatigue. Therefore, we focused on the experiences of those whose views are less commonly represented in existing scholarship and who could provide fresh perspectives. The participants include a food hub account manager, a program manager, a director of a food hub, a director of strategic impact, a food system professional, a program coordinator, a program manager, and an office manager and events coordinator (Table 1). During the recruitment process, we first sent an email to potential participants to seek their consent (via IRB-approved email recruitment and information sheet) and interest in being interviewed and to share their availability for a meeting to be scheduled. All participants responded positively. See Table 1 for a summary description of each participant and their corresponding pseudonyms.

Data collection ceased after the tenth interview. We used the stopping rule of saturation, the point where data are adequate and appropriate for analytical depth, support of conclusions and minimizing risk of incomplete or biased findings (Ahmed, 2025; Duran et al., 2006; Jennings & Yeager, 2025). By the final interview, no new data emerged that provided novel insights, codes, or themes (Ahmed, 2025; Tong et al., 2007).

Interview Protocol

We designed semi-structured interview questions to focus on social, cultural, human, and political capital. The initial set of questions aimed to create a baseline to understand the participant's job role, occupation, and responsibilities. For *social capital,* the interview questions asked about the trust, relationships, and networks that promote collaboration in the community, with questions like, "how would you describe the social cohesion and trust you experience with other food systems organizations?" and "what other food system organizations do you work with?" Questions about *cultural capital* delved into the values, norms, and traditions that define the organization. We designed the questions to understand the extent to which these organizations' mission and vision statements reflect their cultural identity. The *human capital* questions focused on the skills and knowledge that individuals bring to and acquire within the organization. Questions such as "What sorts of training or professional development have you engaged in since beginning work here?" aimed to evaluate how organizations are committed to employee growth. *Political capital* questions explored the organization's role in policy advocacy, its internal decision-making processes, and the extent to which employees are encouraged to participate in policy activities. The semi-structured format allowed the interviewer to ensure that key topics were covered while allowing for probes to gain greater insight (Ahmed, 2025). The interview guide is available from the authors on request.

Coding and Analysis Process

Coding is a critical component of qualitative research that involves breaking down data into distinct parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences (Cope, 2021; Saldaña, 2015). We used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, throughout the coding process. The responses pertaining to definitions of the four CCs were coded in an *a priori* deductive manner, based on research and interview questions (Bingham, 2023). Subsequently, the data were coded inductively for emergent and cross-cutting themes, carried out in three primary stages: **initial** coding (reviewing the transcripts to understand the data), a second coding round where **open codes** were applied to all sections of the interview, excluding the introductory and closing remarks, and a third round of coding, the **focused** coding stage where the codes were grouped into broader thematic categories (Bingham, 2023; Cope & Kurtz, 2023). This approach allows researchers to remain closely grounded in participants' words and perspectives, ensuring the analysis reflects the participants' realities (Saldaña, 2015).

Based on the three-stage approach, descriptive codes were initially generated based on the explicit content of responses. These codes were provisional and remained open to modification as the analysis proceeded. In the focused coding stage, the initial codes were evaluated and grouped into broader thematic categories, directly addressing the concepts of social, cultural, human, and political capital outlined in the research questions. Saldaña (2015) defines focused coding as the process of integrating and synthesizing significant and frequent codes to develop higher order themes and analytical codes. At this stage, the data are grouped into meaningful patterns, as relationships and connections between themes are identified. The themes were divided into subcodes to provide a detailed understanding for analysis. Throughout the coding process, analytical notes were written to capture reflections, questions, and emerging ideas as recommended by qualitative scholars (Cope, 2021; Cope & Kurtz, 2023; Saldaña, 2015).

A single coder (the lead author) analyzed the data , and was guided by extensive mentoring sessions (as recommended by Jennings and Yeager, 2025) by the fourth author, a well-published and recognized expert and instructor in qualitative methodology (e.g., Cope & Kurtz, 2023; Hay & Cope, 2021). The lead and fourth authors met

twice a month from August 2025–March 2026 to refine the codes. Specifically, the lead author shared proposed codes for each pertinent potion of interview transcript and in an iterative process until agreement was reached.

Table 1. Summary Description of Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Experience	Organization	Role
Rose	2 ½ years	Food hub	Account manager
Grace	4 years	State agency	Programs and outreach coordinator
Judith	6 years	Nonprofit	Operations manager
Bee	10 years	Nonprofit/Farmer	Director of strategic impact
Rita	4 years	Nonprofit	Director of development
Tenzin	2 years	Nonprofit	Programs and outreach coordinator
Omar	4 years	Nonprofit	Program coordinator
Matt	6 years	Nonprofit	Program associate
Mary	3 years	State agency	Project manager
Josh	3 years	Nonprofit	Office manager

Positionality Statement

As a Black international female graduate student, I (the lead author) acknowledge that my identity may have influenced the responses during the interviews with employees from Vermont food system organizations in different ways. My race and gender could influence how participants responded, particularly to questions about diversity. To investigate this potential influencing factor, I reviewed each organization's website in November 2024 for information on its values and stance on issues of diversity. This review showed that some of these organizations launched equity initiatives in 2020, while others also created an internal equity task force and issued public statements on racial justice. These factors may have made participants more favorable to my study, and this is taken into consideration.

Summary of Steps to Maintain Methodological Rigor

We took the following steps to ensure and demonstrate the methodological rigor of our qualitative study:

- Building on previous topical and methodological literature and highlighting the research gap and information needed to guide new inquiry (Duran et al., 2006)
- Descriptions of sampling, recruitment, interview instrument, and analytic processes (Tong et al., 2007)
- Use of memoing and analytical software (Tong et al., 2007; Ahmed, 2025)
- Extensive mentoring of student by experienced qualitative researcher (Jennings & Yeager, 2025)
- Positionality statement of lead author to reveal how researcher background influences interpretation and to enhance reflexivity (Tong et al., 2007)
- Discussion of limitations of research (Duran et al., 2006)
- Triangulation of results with other data sources (Ahmed, 2025; Duran et al., 2006; Tong et al., 2007)

Results

Table 1 summarizes the experiences, roles, and organizations of the sample.

Respondents' Descriptions of Social, Cultural, Human, and Political Capitals

Social capital is largely influenced by the state's small geographic size and the connected nature of its nonprofit and food-hub communities. Participants described how frequent interactions help build trust, foster mutual understanding, and encourage collaboration across organizations. One participant shared,

> I think the environment in the food systems world is really collaborative and that folks are friendly and have worked with each other in lots of capacities and have this built-in trust that allows work to move a lot quicker than if that wasn't established. (Grace)

These regular connections contribute to a sense of familiarity that supports effective communication and collective problem-solving. One participant described the social connection as positive, with a lot of collaboration between the Vermont nonprofits and the food hubs. Judith shared, "Honestly, it's been really positive, especially working with other food hubs and I mean, there's a lot of collaboration between the Vermont nonprofits and the food hubs in general."

The cultural capital embedded in these food systems reflects a blend of long-standing values and evolving, mission-driven practices. Participants described the cultural capital in the organization as a fast-paced, hardworking internal culture that is rooted in its mission and shared commitment to supporting the food system and its partners.

> I think that we're lucky to be a mission driven organization and it's always focused on supporting our food system, supporting our partners and our farmers. I think internally we all work hard and at a fast pace and that happens in a lot of businesses, and you know in nonprofits especially. (Matt)

Another participant described the cultural capital in the organization as connected to it being a woman-led organization and composed of young staff, which they saw as fostering a sense of innovation and transformative energy.

Human capital in these food system organizations is described as the knowledge, skills, and lived experiences that staff bring to their work. One participant shared:

> I had a passion for local healthy food and promoting that in communities and had some experience working with food pantries and food access organizations and organizing getting folks organized. What I brought to this work was a passion for local food and a desire to promote the local food scene in Vermont. I've really learned a lot and really, I gained a lot of skills in the past 2½ years working in this job. (Rose)

The respondents placed great value on experiential knowledge as a critical part of human capital. They described how their experiences across farming, food service, institutional roles, nonprofit leadership, and policy engagement have equipped them with the skills, insights, and confidence to navigate complex challenges in the food system. They described their experiences not only as a source of technical skill but also as a foundation for leadership and systemic understanding. One participant shared, "I have a lot of experience in the food system, from working in restaurants and grocery stores to being a farmer myself and knowing how difficult it is to grow and source food" (Matt). This experience is perceived as critical in navigating food system challenges, as it equips individuals with a multidimensional perspective and the adaptability needed to respond effectively to disruptions.

Experience was tied to people's personal involvement that contributed to a deeper understanding of how their organization works, its history, structure, and internal processes. This knowledge developed through many years of working in the food system sector. As a result, their experience helped keep their organizations steady and consistent and allowed them to guide or mentor others effectively. One participant shared, "I came into this role with a background in nonprofit fundraising, administration, and communications, and had completed a nonprofit management course. These experiences prepared me to manage finances, lead teams, and support board development" (Rita).

Participants also described how professional experience supported the acquisition of leadership and organizational skills. One person shared, "I have learned a lot about food distribution, food safety, and recognizing product quality. I also didn't know anything about fundraising or facilitating meetings before, but I gained those skills over time" (Tenzin). Participants highlighted the importance of experience in strategic roles that demanded communication with policymakers, funders, and organizational stakeholders. For example, "I've had opportunities to navigate different funders and manage the full lifecycle of grant projects. I've also grown in my ability to inform policy and engage legislators on issues our clients face" (Grace). Gaining knowledge through a range of professional roles enhances not only practical skills

but also strategic understanding and the ability to respond to challenges. In this way, experience reinforces both personal and organizational strength, supporting the flexibility and enduring viability of Vermont's food system.

Political capital was present in these food system organizations in their ability to support and advocate for systemic change and engage with broader policy and governance issues in the food system. Our analysis revealed advocacy for change as an important expression of political capital in Vermont's food system networks. While not all organizations engaged directly in formal advocacy, many participants described active roles in influencing food policy, supporting advocacy partners, or contributing to state level discussions. These efforts addressed structural barriers while promoting systemic change. Some participants described how their organizations directly engaged in policy advocacy. For instance, Bee shared:

> We've done a scan of local food policy incentives in the past, while working with a group of folks that are advocating for local food policy incentives in their state and we've brought that information to the state department of agriculture to try to advocate for more of those policies.

Bee further described advocacy as a purposeful tool for creating impact. Her perspective indicates that even when it was not a primary organizational focus, it remained helpful in advancing broader, long-term objectives in the food system. She said, "It's very much a big part of what we see as a lever for change and we're always figuring out where we can have the most impact."

Some organizations did not lead advocacy efforts themselves but collaborated with advocacy-focused partners. These partnerships were seen as strategic, allowing each organization to contribute its unique strengths to avoid redundancy and maximize collective effectiveness. One participant shared:

> We don't have an advocacy or policy focused position at [organization name] because we are very lucky to partner with organizations in our state that are already doing that work. So, we don't want to reinvent the wheel. We want to support folks that we know and trust in doing the work that they're fully trained and doing. (Rose)

Even for those not engaged in formal policy work, opportunities to contribute through testimony or other forms of input were seen as meaningful expressions of influence. Rita shared, "We're not an advocacy organization, [but] we do get called upon quite often to provide testimony on different things happening at the statehouse."

One participant, Rose, expressed the importance of being invited to testify and how it felt. She viewed this opportunity as a recognition of the organization's credibility and influence for change, saying:

> I think we know like whatever political capital power we have within that is recognized by everybody in the organization and you know it means something to be asked to testify. It feels like you're making a difference and you're moving towards a goal that everybody knows is a good thing.

Participants acknowledged the role of their partners as advocates especially in areas such as land use, public funding, and food justice, which highlights the interconnectedness of their missions and clients, even when advocacy itself was not their primary focus. Grace shared:

> A lot of our partners are also advocates for a variety of activities and changes that they'd like to see in, whether it's the working landscape or policy choices or funding opportunities. But that's not necessarily a place where we exist, but we work in collaboration with a lot of those partners outside of their advocacy roles, because we're working with the same clients.

Emergent, Cross-Cutting Themes

The qualitative analysis revealed several emergent themes, providing an explicit connection between participants' experiences and the CCs framework. We identified the theme of *shared work* as reflecting

elements of social capital (networks of collaboration, trust, and mutual support), human capital (experience, individual skills, professional growth, and leadership capacity), and cultural capital (organizational ethos). A second theme, *diversity gaps in institutional collaboration,* emerged as a concern that cuts across multiple capitals, intersecting with cultural and social capital, and highlighting the need for more inclusive and culturally diverse collaborative networks. The analysis below further explores how each thematic area specifically relates to these forms of CC.

Cross-Cutting Theme 1: Shared Work

Shared work refers to a collaborative approach where multiple individuals, teams, or organizations jointly contribute their efforts, resources, and skills towards completing specific tasks or achieving a common goal. This theme highlights both the strengths and challenges involved in collective efforts among food system organizations in Vermont and shows the kind of social cohesion that exists between these organizations. Participants emphasized collaboration as essential to organizational success in pursuing shared goals like funding and capacity-building. As one participant mentioned: "We do a lot of grant writing in partnership with other organizations and try to really collaborate on our strategy around funding" (Judith).

Collaboration extends beyond mutual support to strategic and tangible outcomes: shared work was reinforced by the collaborative ethos embedded deeply within organizational cultures. Participants acknowledged that collaboration was not merely beneficial but essential for achieving the organizational mission. "Collaboration is a key value of our organization. We understand that we cannot reach our mission alone. And so, it's very well understood that to accomplish our work, we must be collaborators and be good partners*"* (Rita).

However, participants also recognized challenges in collaborating with others, particularly regarding differences in organizational pace, priorities, and alignment. As one participant shared:

> There's sometimes some tension because of the necessity of wanting to work together and maybe not necessarily always going at the same speed, but also, being dependent on each other to move the process along. And we're maybe not always on the same page with the speed that we're moving at or priorities. (Rose)

Despite these challenges, ongoing efforts to strengthen communication, networking, and knowledge sharing were viewed as critical factors facilitating effective collaboration. "Generally, we do a pretty good job collaborating and supporting each other…[with] constant communication happening and then also a lot of shared learning and building together" (Mel).

Our analysis highlights shared work as a critical dimension of social capital, which can significantly influence the resilience of Vermont's food systems. Through active collaboration, such as joint projects, grant-writing, and strategic partnerships, stakeholders create interpersonal networks that facilitate rapid and effective responses to disruptions.

Cross-Cutting Theme 2: Diversity Gaps in Institutional Collaboration

Diversity gaps emerged as a critical concern that influences the inclusivity and long-term resilience of Vermont's food system. Participants described how the demographic composition and cultural norms within organizations shape the nature of collaborative efforts. One participant noted the lack of racial diversity in their organization as a limiting factor in establishing more diverse and inclusive partnerships. "We're working on collaborating on projects or grants sometimes. But I will say that the organization I work for is an all-white organization. So, there is a narrowness to like, what are the other organizations we're working with" (Matt). This observation suggests that although collaboration is taking place, it frequently happens in racially and culturally uniform networks, which can unintentionally lead to exclusion and constrain opportunities. Matt further emphasized that efforts to advance equity require critical internal reflection, especially regarding how dominant cultural norms such as white supremacy culture shape organizational practices:

> There is a culture of wanting to do more around justice and equity. In the last, I would

> say, for two years we've been recognizing that white supremacy culture is real and that the work of equity is understanding how it shows up in all our lives, and how we all benefit from dismantling it.

Taken together, the analytical themes of shared work and diversity gaps demonstrate a keen awareness among interviewees of the organizational landscape and a sense of the mutual benefits that are possible with collaboration. However, these themes also show an important level of critical reflexivity among the interviewed professionals, suggesting that they are motivated to address diversity gaps as a way to strengthen relations with other organizations, customers, and the public.

Discussion

This study examined how social, human, political, and cultural capitals contribute to building a resilient food system in Vermont. We focused on a specific case and location (the state of Vermont), taking a broader view than Flora (2018) but narrower than the regional scope of Glowacki-Dudka and colleagues (2013). While many previous CCs studies use secondary data (Deller et al., 2001; Fey et al., 2006), we utilized primary data to understand how CCs operate in resilient food systems.

In the literature, human capital is conceptualized as formal education, technical knowledge, and skills that drive economic productivity (Ali et al., 2018; Subramony et al., 2018). However, our study showed that practical, lived experience is equally important in building resilience in food systems. Beyond increased productivity from developing human capital (Li et al., 2017), this study finds that experience contributes to strategic decision-making and mentoring, as well as navigating complex situations. Our findings highlight the significant role of professional experience as a component of human capital in Vermont's food system organizations. Experience is not just something one has; rather, it is an active tool for making food systems more flexible, participatory, and resilient (Anderson, 2015). Participants' knowledge across farming, food service, nonprofit administration, and advocacy roles shows how some experiences shape their ability to respond adaptively to complex challenges. This aligns with prior research on how actors within food systems are constantly changing their practices to adapt to pressure and perturbations; these changing activities are also correlated with changes in knowledge systems (Anderson, 2015). Building more effective knowledge systems for sustainability takes time and patience, which includes the need to learn from experience and enhance human capital (Cash et al., 2003). Therefore, experience serves as a driving force for shared learning and systemic change. This suggests that professional experience is not just useful at the individual level but also plays an important role in strengthening how organizations and networks respond to complex challenges.

Our study found that political capital in Vermont's food system is built through local advocacy, policy engagement, and trust with funders. While formal political ties were found to be beneficial in corporate settings (Liu et al., 2013), this study highlights how informal relationships and consistent community engagement help organizations access grants and shape policy among nonprofit organizations. Further, this study reveals that political skill is not just an executive trait (F. Wang et al., 2024a); rather, participants demonstrated political skill through coalition-building and being responsive to local needs.

Advocacy for change represents a key aspect of political capital in Vermont's food system organizations. Political capital, as defined in the CCs framework, refers to the ability of individuals or organizations to influence standards, rules, and policy decisions that affect their communities (Casey, 2005). In this study, participants revealed that although not all organizations engaged directly in formal advocacy, many played strategic and supportive roles in shaping food policy. Political capital is not always exercised through conventional channels such as lobbying or policy leadership. Rather, it can take place through collaborative relationships, where trust, legitimacy, and partnership give organizations the ability to influence policy. This insight aligns with what Andree and colleagues (2019) describe as distributed advocacy, where organizations strategically allocate their political voice by building coalitions and reinforcing one another's strength.

Shared Work

We found shared work, defined as collaboration, mutual support, and inter-organizational network-building, to be essential to achieving organizational goals through interlocking investments in social, human, and cultural capital. Glowacki-Dudka and colleagues (2013) emphasize that social capital plays an important role in strengthening local food systems, especially when there is trust, but that social capital can be weakened by divided goals and lack of trust. This was the case in our study, evidenced by some participants' description of challenges they faced in collaborative relationships, such as different priorities, speed, and capacity among partners. Despite these challenges, our findings suggest that collaboration is deeply embedded in the organizational culture of these food system organizations. Participants' emphasis on collaborative grant-writing, shared strategic planning, and organizational co-learning serves as an important source of both knowledge and social connection, which reflects high levels of bonding social capital, as well as developing the human capital that strengthens internal networks and enhances the flow of information and resources among like-minded organizations. These insights align with observations of community-supported agriculture and how intentional communication practices promoted the development of both bridging and bonding forms of social capital (Furness et al., 2022). Similarly, in this study, participants shared that collaborative spaces are where organizations not only achieve common objectives but strengthen interpersonal relationships.

Diversity Gaps in Institutional Collaboration

While the organizations we engaged with had a strong collaborative culture and ethos, a lack of racial and cultural diversity within Vermont's food system organizations limits the scope and effectiveness of collaboration. This aligns with Compton and Meier's (2016) claim that homogeneous groups may foster strong internal ties but struggle with building broader, bridging connections. Indeed, participants acknowledged Vermont organizations' racial and cultural homogeneity as a challenge they are actively thinking about.

Diversity refers to compositional differences among people within a work unit (Roberson, 2019; Roberson et al., 2017). Our findings reveal that Vermont's food system organizations' diversity gaps are barriers to building inclusive, equitable, and resilient networks. Participants expressed concerns that the lack of racial and cultural diversity restricted the scope and inclusiveness of collaborative partnerships. As one participant noted, operating in an all-white organization restricted their ability to work with a broader range of partners, which results in networks that may reinforce existing inequalities. These findings align with broader research on diversity in organizational networks, which emphasize that homogeneous groups tend to exhibit higher levels of bonding social capital but may suffer from limited bridging social capital (Compton & Meier, 2016). The lack of racial and cultural diversity within organizational networks can not only constrain inclusive collaboration but also undermine the adaptive capacity and long-term resilience in the context of Vermont's food system organizations (Page, 2007).

Other data sources and evidence helped us to triangulate our finding that Vermont's leading food system organizations value racial diversity and justice despite the lack of diversity in the state. For example, Farm to Plate (Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, 2017) and NOFA-VT (2026) each have explicit racial justice statements and missions. Nonetheless, Vermont is described as the least racially diverse state in the nation (Vermont Housing Needs Assessment, 2025). Closing these diversity gaps requires intentional strategies that go beyond initial inclusion efforts. Roberson (2019) argues that inclusive organizations must move from acknowledging diversity to actively embedding it into decision-making processes, leadership structures, and partnership strategies. In the context of Vermont's food systems, this could involve setting measurable diversity targets for collaboration, establishing partnerships with organizations led by or serving communities of color (including those outside Vermont), and embedding anti-racist principles into governance and operational practices.

Thus, political influence in food systems does not rely solely on direct advocacy but is often strengthened through collective action and rela-

tionship-building. When organizations work together, whether through shared messaging, joint campaigns, or mutual support, they can extend their reach and increase their effectiveness in shaping food policy. We recommend that food system organizations continue to build strong partnerships and coalitions that allow them to act collectively, even if individual groups do not have the capacity to engage in formal policy work. Capacity-building efforts such as advocacy training, collaborative planning sessions, and policy literacy workshops can help more organizations find their voice and understand how to contribute meaningfully to policy discussions. Investment in policy infrastructure such as shared advocacy platforms, communication support, and policy analysis can help ensure that the political capital of smaller or less-resourced organizations is not overlooked. By broadening how advocacy is understood and practiced, food system organizations can make more inclusive, strategic contributions to shaping equitable and sustainable food policies. Over time, this kind of distributed political engagement helps build a more resilient food system, one where diverse voices are heard, local needs are addressed, and policy decisions are shaped by those most affected.

Our findings reflect the three core capacities of food system resilience of absorption, adaptation, and transformation as described by Tendall and colleagues (2015). Social capital, shown through shared work among Vermont's food system organizations, reflects absorption because it allows groups to respond to disruptions through shared resources and support. Adaptation is seen in the way human capital, especially professional experience and skills, helps individuals and organizations adjust their work in response to new challenges. This reflects how people draw on their past experiences and knowledge to contribute to their current situations. Finally, transformation is visible in the efforts of organizations to advocate for policy changes and address issues of diversity. These actions show how political and cultural capital are being used to influence decision-making processes and support the development of more inclusive and fair food systems. Community capitals not only help organizations cope with challenges; they also contribute to longer-term changes in the food system.

Implications

The findings of this study have several implications for strengthening food system resilience. In particular, they highlight opportunities for food system organizations, funders, and policymakers to better cultivate experiential knowledge, support collaborative work, and promote diversity and inclusion. The following sections discuss these implications and their potential application within food system organizations.

Cultivating Experiential Knowledge

Food system organizations should treat experience as a key part of human capital that contributes to long-term resilience. Experience can support better decision-making, promote learning from past successes and failures, and improve coordination across different sectors of the food system. Based on our findings, we recommend that organizations create more intentional ways to share and apply experiential knowledge. This can include mentorship between newer and more experienced staff, open discussions about lessons learned, and regular opportunities for staff to reflect on their work. Funders and policy leaders can help by supporting professional development programs and by recognizing experience (not just formal education) as an important qualification in hiring and leadership roles. In the long term, valuing and using experience in this way can help build a food system that is more resilient. It allows organizations to adapt more effectively, strengthen relationships, and respond to unexpected challenges with insight and confidence.

Sharing Work

Organizations that invest time and energy into building and maintaining relationships are more likely to be successful in working across boundaries. To support this, organizations should set aside dedicated time for joint planning, shared training sessions, and frequent communication. These practices can help ensure that differences in priorities or capacity do not become barriers to collaborations that play an important role in creating a more resilient food system. When organizations trust one another and communicate effectively, they are better equipped to respond to challenges, adapt to change, and

coordinate responses during times of disruption. Therefore, supporting collaboration is not only valuable for immediate project outcomes but also a long-term investment in building a food system that is more sustainable, equitable, and adaptable.

Building Diversity

Without these intentional efforts, Vermont's food system organizations may continue to reflect and reproduce existing social inequalities, limiting their ability to respond to complex challenges that represent the full range of community needs. A lack of diversity not only narrows the pool of knowledge and experience available to organizations but also reduces their legitimacy and reach in broader, diverse communities. To address these challenges, Vermont food system organizations should adopt equity-centered collaboration frameworks that prioritize inclusion. This includes conducting equity audits of current partnerships, creating safe spaces for cross-cultural dialogue, and ensuring that leadership roles reflect the demographic diversity of the wider community. Training programs on cultural humility, anti-racism, and inclusive governance can help shift internal culture and practice. Funders and policymakers have an important role to play by requiring equity benchmarks in grant criteria and supporting organizations that demonstrate authentic engagement with underrepresented communities. Such support not only fosters justice and representation but also builds a more resilient Vermont food system, one that draws strength from a broad base of perspectives, adapts to shifting social and economic conditions, and ensures that food system strategies are responsive, inclusive, and sustainable over the long term.

Limitations

This study has several limitations related to the study sample and qualitative research design. The following sections discuss limitations concerning the size and composition of the sample, as well as methodological considerations related to qualitative rigor and the analytical process.

Sample

One limitation is that the study relied on a modest number of semi-structured interviews with professionals in food system organizations. While the sample provided rich insights, it may not capture the full range of perspectives, especially those of smaller community-based organizations or other state government agencies. After 10 interviews, we achieved saturation (Ahmed, 2025; Duran et al., 2006; Jennings & Yeager, 2025; Tong et al., 2007). Our participants' familiarity with the research team and subject matter may have limited the breadth of responses and insights gained. We acknowledge that counting and correlating key themes from responses in a larger sample, ideally outside of Vermont, would add to the reliability of our findings. Future research could further explore how to address diversity gaps that were identified in food system networks and investigate the long-term impacts of different management practices on market resilience.

Qualitative Rigor

While we implemented and documented many recommended steps to ensure rigor—namely noting research gap, description of sampling process, use of memos and software, mentoring, positionality of lead author and triangulation strategies (Ahmed, 2025; Duran et al., 2006; Jennings & Yeager, 2025; Tong et al., 2007)—there are further steps that would have strengthened our study. The use of multiple coders, greater triangulation, and member checking transcripts with subjects are practices that we shall endeavor to incorporate in future qualitative work.

Conclusion

Our research contributes to a deeper understanding of community capitals' role in food system resilience and offers practical insights for policymakers and practitioners working to strengthen local food systems. We know of no other study that used the CCs model to understand the norms and policies of food system organizations and state agencies. We hope to contribute to a conversation about how this model can help understand these organizations. Furthermore, while Vermont is a small state, many of its programs and efforts are innovative and have been studied and, in some cases, adopted or emulated by other states. We believe there are lessons to be learned and applied

elsewhere from Vermont's robust nonprofit food systems sector. Building resilient local food systems requires leveraging various forms of community capital. As Vermont continues to lead in local food system development, these findings can inform policies and initiatives to strengthen food security, support local agriculture, and enhance community well-being in the face of ongoing challenges and disruptions.

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