

PRESENTATION SNAPSHOT

Food system solutions to address food security and local economic development: The case of food hubs in the Northeastern United States



Cesare Cascella, Mediterranean University of Reggio Calabria *

Presentation Abstract

Socioeconomic inequalities and natural resource exploitation reflect the limitations of how the current food system functions. Global and local conceptual categories are used to describe two alternatives that are shaping the way food is produced, processed, distributed, and consumed. In the United States, food hubs are seen as a model that is able to scale up local and regional food systems in the face of the negative consequences generated by the dominant globally oriented system. Although food security and economic development are the main desirable outcomes for any food system initiative, not much research has been done about how food hubs contribute to these two interrelated key issues. In this study, the research questions have been narrowed down by taking into account the four dimensions through which food security is commonly framed (availability, access, utilization, and stability) and the seven drivers of the community wealth building approach to economic development (ownership, place, multipliers, collaboration, inclusion, workforce, and system). Seven food hubs operating in the Northeastern U.S. were surveyed. Qualitative information was collected about their activities in accordance with the dimensions and drivers included in the adopted conceptual framework. The results suggested that food hubs that operate as business incubators and food processing facilities are involved in several wealth building strategies. Nonetheless, food hubs cannot generally be considered a stand-alone policy to increase food access for underserved social groups.

Keywords: Food Hub; Food Security; Local Economic Development; Community Wealth Building

Key Points

- The community wealth building framework can be used as a design tool for local and regional food system strategies.
- Food hubs can be conceived as community wealth-building institutions.
- The food hubs that are performing better according to the chosen local economic development drivers are nonprofit organizations.

continued

* Cesare Cascella is a designer and researcher based in Boston, Massachusetts. The work presented at the Place-Based Food Systems conference was developed during his Ph.D. studies in urban regeneration and economic development at Mediterranean University of Reggio Calabria. Currently, he is working at a landscape architecture firm, conducting landscape performance evaluation. He can be contacted at cesarecascella@gmail.com.

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- Despite the frequently made promises, only a few food hubs are actively implementing policies to increase food access.
- Public procurement strategies represent a tremendous opportunity to increase food hubs' impact.

Food hubs are expected to fulfill multiple missions (e.g., support small food producers, increase food access, and reduce food miles) while being financially viable businesses (Hardy, Hamm, Pirog, Fisk, Farbman, & Fischer, 2016). That seems too much to promise, and the presented study confirmed a substantial gap between such high expectations and relatively modest outcomes (Fischer, Pirog, & Hamm, 2015). Nonetheless, by reframing food hubs activities using the lens of community wealth building (Kelly & McKinley, 2015), the research shed light on the importance these organizations may have for the local economies.



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