

# North Country Regional Foods Initiative

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Photo by D. Hickey

## Research Report on the Impacts of Local and Regional Foods in the Adirondack-North Country Region

### III

## Impact Analysis Research Brief F: Organizational Support

### Overview

This brief, one of six in the *Research Report on the Impacts of Local and Regional Foods in the Adirondack-North Country Region*, presents results from a study of **North Country organizations** working to support connections between local and regional food producers and consumers.<sup>1,2</sup> Our study examined the activities of each of these organizations, in order to understand the impacts they have on farms and communities in Northern New York. We also explored opportunities for collaboration on a regional basis. With the goal of helping communities better support businesses utilizing local and regional markets to sell their farm and food products and enhancing the positive ways these businesses contribute to the region, the results of this analysis are intended as a resource for other farmers, food business owners/operators, consumers, policymakers and community & economic developers working to enhance and sustain agriculture in northern New York.

### B. Organizational Support

A summary of responses from qualitative interviews with representatives from eleven Adirondack-North Country organizations is presented below. Recurring themes from individuals' responses are highlighted. We use direct quotes (in italics) to place the challenges, opportunities, and strategies faced and employed

<sup>1</sup> The North Country Regional Food Initiative is a one year project dedicated to understanding economic and social impacts of local and regional food initiatives in the Adirondack-North Country and enhancing the ways these initiatives positively contribute to the region. The project is a collaborative effort of the seven Cornell Cooperative Extension Associations of Northern New York (Clinton, Essex, Franklin, Hamilton, Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence counties) and the Community and Rural Development Institute (CaRDI) at Cornell University.

<sup>2</sup> Although we recognize that "local" and "regional" food systems are not necessarily the same thing and in many, if not most, cases are very different, we couple the words "local" and "regional" herein and throughout the *Research Report on the Impacts of Local and Regional Foods in the Adirondack-North Country Region* for the following reasons: (1) Given the relative size of the Adirondack-North Country region, even a regional food system is relatively local, particularly in comparison to regional foodsheds that encompass multiple states (e.g. the Northeast Region); (2) Many communities in Northern NY border another state or another country, for people living in these communities, depending on whether or not "local" and "regional" are defined by distance or political boundaries, a distance that is local is literally local and regional at the same time (e.g.: When a NY consumer purchases apples from a Canadian orchard 12 miles away, it is a local purchase in terms of distance, though a regional purchase in terms of political boundaries.); and (3) An overarching goal of the NCRFI is to cultivate a regional approach to economic and community development - this goal is based on the understanding that communities conserve resources and gain assets by working together regionally. However, shifting from a "local" to a "regional" approach is not necessarily intuitive; by coupling "local" and "regional" we hope to cultivate a paradigm shift, one in which one's locality is seen in regional terms.

by these organizations in the context of Northern NY. To respect the confidentiality of the interviewees, individuals' and organizations' names are not used in association with their quotes.

Interviewers inquired of the organizational representatives:

- Is working to build and strengthen the local food system within your area a primary goal of your organization, if so why?
- Could you briefly describe the work your organization is doing in support of this?
- Where do you think there are gaps in our ability to pursue meaningful change in the local food system?
- What are the barriers you think must be overcome in order to build strong local food systems within the North Country?
- In what ways could a partnership of organizations and agencies working to support local/regional food initiatives address these barriers?

**Why work to build and strengthen the local/regional food system?** Reasons for pursuing the goal of **building and strengthening the local/regional food system** range from connecting farmers and consumers, to appreciation of local/fresh produce, to adding income to the county. For most organizational representatives, however, local/regional food system development is not a foremost part of their mission but rather a by-product in their pursuit of a more primary goal. One organization, for example, has as its mission the development of new agricultural products, new cultivars (e.g. cold-hardy grapes), and new industries in the region. Local/regional food systems development, has however, resulted from these activities.

*[The group would like to build the industry locally] ... certain varieties grow well here that wouldn't thrive in other areas.*

Furthermore, of the organizations which do not see local or regional food system development as their primary goal, some support producers and consumers participating in local and regional food markets as part of assistance provided for all farms in support of agriculture development.

*We have a lot of farmers' market and livestock producers that sell a lot of product locally. We represent all commodity groups, as well as direct market farmers who market more locally.*

*One of the top five priorities [of this organization] is improving the viability of farms. Do [we] care if sales are local? No, but production is local and the dollars are coming back into the community. As long as the farm is profitable and viable, then that is good for the local economy.*

**Ways of supporting local and regional food connections** Organizations in the Adirondack-North Country region are helping farmers make connections within their communities in a variety of ways. Specific approaches reflect the overarching mission of the organization, some examples include:

Through promotion of food security, various organizations encourage increased access to local/regional foods for all individuals within a community. They help farmers learn about consumer preferences, their ability to pay and even how they get to a market.

*People come to the market because they expect fresh, local vegetables and fruits. We actively encourage growers to know their audience and grow for them. Seniors want their beets and Swiss chard; young families want...fruit.*

Organizations are also creating tools and resources to connect producers and consumers. These include a website, a regional map, and guides or directories to local food. Organizations also create educational programs for producers, consumers and elected officials, and develop tools, such as cookbooks and recipes, to help farmers' market and consumers use locally/regionally grown products. Some examples of the types of tools and resources reported include:

*Mentoring programs for new farmers*

*Research and demonstration of innovative agricultural ideas*

*An educational DVD [for consumers showcasing several farms selling their products through local/regional market outlets]*

Another approach that many organizations use to support local and regional food connections are **promotional events and activities**: Harvest festivals, farmers' markets, legislative receptions, and press coverage.

*[During] our annual Legislators Reception...legislators, their staff and Commissioners of various state agencies are invited to partake in the food products of NYS provided by our members.*

Organizations often also provide **press** for such promotions. Having relationships with media outlets and receiving regular coverage through the newsprint, radio or web enables organizations to draw attention to new businesses or initiatives that might not otherwise be on the radar screen of media outlets. This type of publicity is important because it is free to the enterprises showcased.

Some organizations offer direct support services:

*We secure [farmers'] market locations with owners, zoning boards, planning committees, local governments, etc. We offer insurance to all our sponsored markets. Most of the vendor fee goes into advertising and promotion of the markets.*

**Grant writing** is also a type of service organizations provide that supports and assists connections between farmers and communities.

**Facilitation** is an essential role for organizations. Connecting farmers or communities to resources that will enable them to achieve their goals saves time and money for both. Organizations reported serving as a resource locator (e.g. helping to find grants and loans, buildings, and mediators), as an interpreter of local, state and federal regulations, and as a convener for individuals and groups to work together on common issues.

Though not every group reported this, **lobbying**, was seen as an important role for some organizations; they represent farmers in the region in their legislative lobbying efforts. This support is important because

legislation can be critical in enabling or restricting farm operations, from tax laws to processing regulations, zoning ordinances, and other issues at the intersection of community and commercial interests.

Helping a community work towards broader economic and social well-being goals, some organizations reported supporting local and regional food connections as a method of **community development**. Specifically, they have created opportunities for agri-tourism, worked with youth, and collaborated on fairs and special events that attract tourists to the region.

## C. Challenges

Organizations described challenges to their own success and to the viability of farms in the Adirondack-North Country region. They recognize that their ability to effectively support local and regional food system development is related to the viability of the farms they work with. *In terms of challenges to the organizations*, a **lack of financial resources**, limited **consumer knowledge regarding local/regional foods**, **poverty in northern NY** and **world views** were all cited as barriers within their work. With respect to farming and marketing, the organizations cited **national policy**, **regulatory issues**, **inadequate infrastructure** and **climate** as challenges to marketing and production. More detailed descriptions of each of these challenges are provided below.

**Very limited financial resources** mean that few organizations have any full-time employees, and most are staffed by part-time or consulting personnel; all but one organization reported having volunteer assistance. As one interviewee put it, his organization lives on a

*'shoestring existence,' [with substantial] reliance on volunteers*

Organizational representatives also reported feeling that they are often challenged in achieving their goals by a **lack of consumer knowledge** about healthy foods and how to use them (cooking with raw ingredients, label reading) and the constant presence of conflicting mass media messages.

*The food marketing gurus have the public pretty much reliant on all those high cost/low nutrition convenience foods. But, the cost of convenience has sky-rocketed, so perhaps folks will really start to buy local.*

*Commercial syrups! Aunt Jemima & Mrs. Butterworth [exasperate another organizational representative: from her perspective] more education [is] needed [to help consumers understand how much better locally produced syrups are than these products].*

Another interviewee identified **poverty in northern NY** as a challenge, describing purchasing habits that focus on price and quantity over nutrition. This interviewee feels people are paying more for the processing and packaging of the food they purchase than for the nutritional quality of that food.

Many organizational representatives described certain world views or perspectives as posing challenges to their work. One described a lack of pride in local/regional products and feels,

*we should [instead] strut our stuff [and] be proud of our ability to grow and produce terrific food.*

Similarly, another respondent expressed concern that there is a world view in the region which holds that the majority of resources (organizational, financial, and institutional) allocated in support of the

agricultural industry should be dedicated to the large scale dairy farms that make a significantly greater contribution to the Northern New York economy than the small-scale diversified enterprises that typically support local/regional food systems.

Perspectives reflecting a sense of territoriality among organizations was also cited as a challenge. Respondents shared the sentiment that there is

*[a] need for more sharing and cooperation where everyone feels like they will come out ahead.*

Challenges that interviewees feel farms themselves face, and thereby affect their work, include **national policy, regulatory issues, and inadequate infrastructure**. Examples that illustrate these themes include one interviewee's description of federal subsidies that favor 'cheap and imported foods' and undermine the prices local/regional farmers are able to charge. Water testing and farm to school and farmers' markets regulations are other regulatory issues that are difficult. In regards to infrastructure, several organizations identified the following concerns: the lack of transportation to markets for both consumers and producers (the need for a distribution system); the absence of processing facilities that are accessible to small-scale entrepreneurs; increasingly limited financial support – specifically a decline in agricultural lenders in the region; farm labor; the need for technology specific to agricultural production in the Northern NY climate; and, an overarching concern that the number of farms currently operating in Northern NY is inadequate to meet the demand for local/regional products.

A few interviewees also see the northern climate as a challenge to the viability of local/regional market enterprises but also see season extension practices as one means to overcoming this challenge.

## D. Opportunities

Overwhelmingly, the greatest asset interviewees see in this region and therefore the greatest opportunity is the **people resources** in the Adirondack-North Country region, that is, the skills and talents of those committed to making local/regional foods work. This includes an

*enthusiastic and knowledgeable farmer base and a rural region with residents that still possess an agricultural memory and are familiar with farming and are supportive of local farms.*

In addition to people, interviewees see the physical resources (land/water) in the area as both an asset and a means to further opportunity. As described by one respondent, the Adirondack-North Country region has:

*Decent soils, a decent growing season, good climate, and land prices that are really low compared to almost any other part of the country.*

Other opportunities stem from forces that, though based outside of the region, have a direct impact on the area: These include the **growing interest in relationships between local/regional foods and health, the draw of the Adirondacks, and tourists with money** to spend that visit the area. Moreover, **outside funds** are available to organizations in the area from various institutions and agencies as well as individuals.

Interestingly, both a **growing population** and the region's overall **small population** were cited as opportunities; the former being particular to a single county in the region and the latter being seen as making it easier for direct communications and fewer distractions within relatively small communities.

Though many aspects of the region's **infrastructure** were cited as challenges, one item noted as an opportunity is the presence of Interstates 81 and 87. On the flanks of the Northern New York, these routes enable transportation and therefore sales of local/regional products within and just outside the region.

## E. Strategies

What should communities do through local officials and community & economic developers in collaboration with organizations to better support farm and food businesses utilizing local and regional markets to sell their farm and food products? A majority of organizational representatives interviewed see two strategies as being critical for furthering their work and strengthening the local/regional food system. The strategies identified are promotion and education for both consumers and producers.

**Promotion** entails event coordination across the region, increasing events that showcase local/regional foods and agriculture, as well as promotion of farming in general to increase the available local/regional food supply. Promotion also refers to that within the agricultural community itself, with one interviewee suggesting that farmers need to be more positive about themselves.

**Education** of producers refers primarily to increasing variety and supply of quality local/regional foods. Education of consumers ranged from providing a better understanding of the real costs of growing food and the benefits of supporting local/regional farms to cooking demonstrations at farmers' markets. It was mentioned that Cornell Cooperative Extension already does food and nutrition education, but that markets need to make better and more frequent use of this resource.

Another strategy for strengthening the local/regional food system includes coordinated collaboration among organizations:

*[One organizational representative urged Cornell Cooperative Extension to] help [the organizations] work together, learn from each other.*

Likewise **encouraging local government support** for local/regional food initiatives including expansion of agri-tourism and **securing financial support** for these initiatives – in particular start up capital for new farmers – as well **addressing regulatory issues** with a unified voice and increasing the amount of **technical support** available to farmers were cited.

Two final strategies mentioned by interviewees that could be explored by building on all of the above suggestions are further **market development**, linking farmers and chefs, food service, institutions, etc. and identifying and learning about successful **delivery systems** for getting products to markets.

## F. Conclusions

The information shared by organizations included in this study reflect the accomplishments of many individuals in the Adirondack-North Country region committed to making a local/ regional food system a reality. By documenting the accomplishments of these organizations as well as opportunities and challenges related to their success, and strategies for addressing both, from the perspective of representatives of these organizations, we hope this brief provides further impetus for communities to recognize these efforts, and the ways they contribute to the region, and work together with them to realize their potential benefits.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> To learn more about these businesses refer to the other Research Briefs in Section III of this report at: [www.nnyregionalllocalfoods.org](http://www.nnyregionalllocalfoods.org).

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