



SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS

"The local food movement turns people from passive recipients into active food citizens."

– Fred Kirschenmann, Distinguished Fellow of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture



Sustainable
EATING

From Field to Table



Food and farming systems are critical to economic vitality and community health. However, these systems are often overlooked and undervalued. Strengthening community food systems may help address some of these challenges in Kentucky:

- Job loss and smaller revenue streams
- Declining rural community vitality
- Loss of small and mid-sized farms
- Loss of farmland and working landscapes
- Epidemic levels of obesity and chronic diseases related to eating
- Lack of environmental stewardship
- Increased levels of household food insecurity

The term “sustainable eating” describes a way that food consumers can make choices that support their social, economic, or environmental values. Eating for good health, making sure everyone has access to nutritious foods, and eating to minimize the impact on our planet are some commonly held values associated with sustainable eating.

Sustainable Agriculture and Eating

The word “sustainability” is frequently used when describing a way to do things that minimizes use of non-renewable resources. The three pillars of sustainable agriculture are:

1. Profit over the long term
2. Stewardship of our nation’s land, air, and water
3. A good quality of life for farmers, ranchers, and their communities

Examples of best practices in sustainable agriculture include effective marketing, ecological insect and weed management, rotational grazing, conservation tillage and cover crops, crop and livestock diversity, nutrient management, energy conservation, and a whole-farm approach. While livestock-based production contributes to greenhouse gas emissions and water pollution, many livestock farmers are taking steps to lessen their carbon footprint. Irrigation and high-tunnel systems, which are increasingly used in sustainable agriculture, allow efficient use of resources and extend the growing season. Other necessary components of food production, including pollination by bees, can also be included in discussions about sustainable agriculture.



High tunnels help extend the growing season for farmers across the country.

Photo by Lynda Richardson, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

Community Food Assessments

Conducting a community food assessment helps everyone think about the food system as a whole. By gaining a better understanding of the current food system, your community can collaborate on a few priority areas. A good assessment involves a broad, representative sample of the community and may include the following information:

- History and culture of the local food system
- Economic, political, and social trends that led to the current food system
- The current agricultural system, including production and labor issues
- The food retail sector, including direct marketing opportunities
- Community and school gardens
- Food consumption patterns
- Local food processing and value-added capacity
- Food-related employment
- Local food and agriculture organizations and their projects
- Community residents’ food, cooking, and farming skills
- Local food, agriculture, and land-use policies

Assessing and mapping food-related assets allows community members to mobilize available capacity to revitalize food systems by:

- Identifying potential collaborators and community resources
- Encouraging participation of a wide range of community members
- Integrating otherwise separate components of the food system (e.g. transportation and food access issues)
- Creating a sense of community identity among participants
- Making a community’s local food system more visible
- Educating policymakers and other local government officials about the potential of the local food system for development and well-being
- Promoting leadership and employment opportunities in the community to be served

Building Strong Community Food Systems

Successful community food systems development work often focuses on both policies and projects. Short-term success with projects creates a visible, concrete accomplishment while building trust and cohesion in the community. To meet long-term goals, the creation of local food and agriculture policies that support community food system development are helpful. By creating working groups of like-minded community members, a participatory process can be used to develop a strategic plan. Topics for working groups might include:

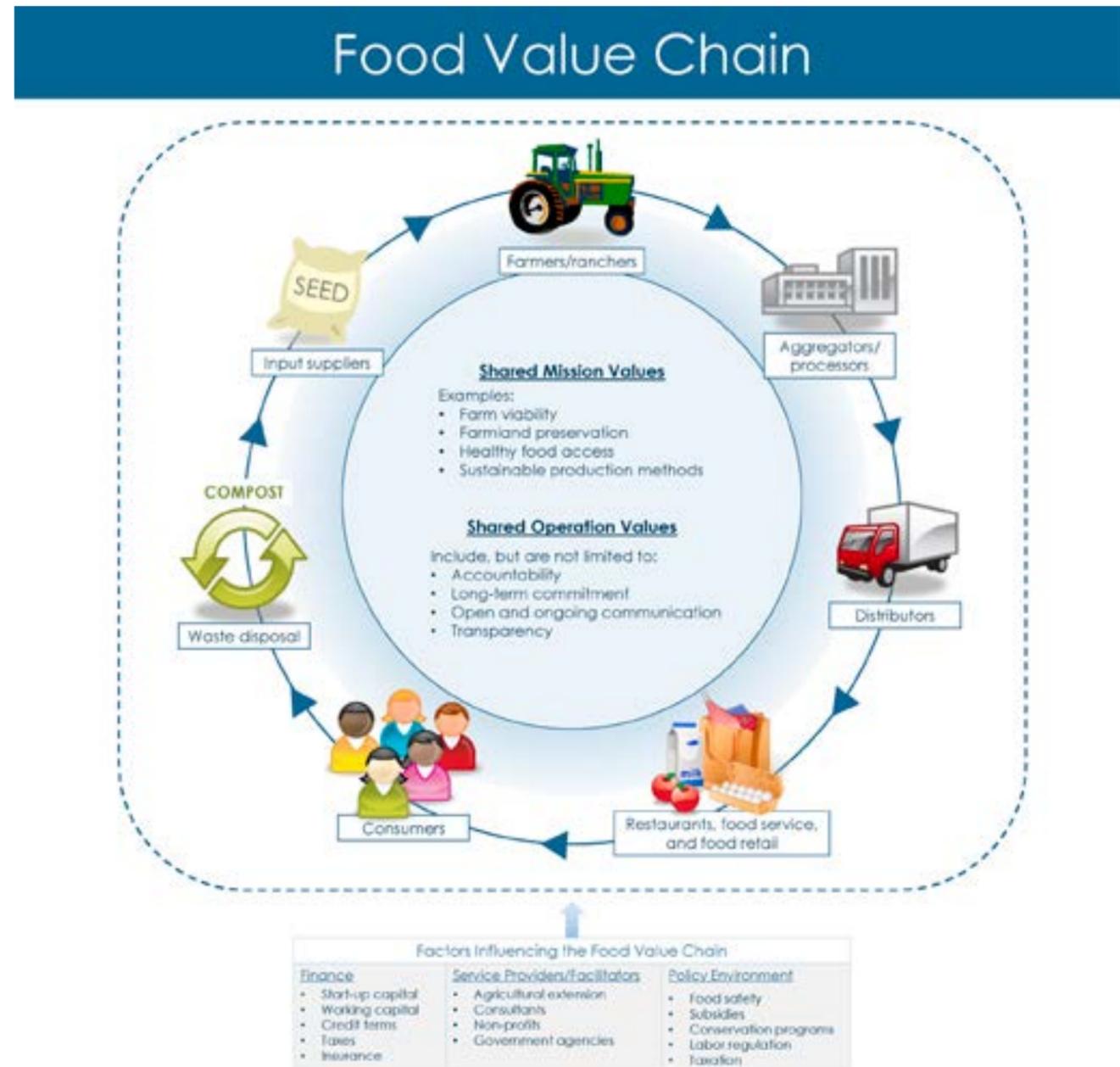
- Consumer demand and community engagement
- Infrastructure and resources (assets)
- Institutional, retail, and wholesale opportunities
- Producer outreach and supply development

Components of a community food system may include:

- Farm-to-institution programs (e.g. farm to school)
- Farmers’ markets
- Community supported agriculture (CSAs)
- Food cooperatives
- Food equity (access to nutritious foods for all)
- Community gardening
- Community dinners
- Community kitchens
- Food entrepreneurs (aggregation, processing, distribution, retailing)
- Urban/rural food connections

These features of a community food system, along with shared values and vision, can help build a food value chain (Figure 1). Food value chains are collaborative networks where participants work together to achieve common economic goals, while supporting agreed-upon social and environmental values.

Figure 1. Designed by the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service and the Wallace Center at Winrock International for *Food Chain Values: Lessons Learned from Research and Practice*.



Kentucky has a rich history of culinary tradition and family farms. With the help of new farmers, chefs, and innovators, we are reshaping community food systems to reflect the values of the people who live here. If you are interested in learning more about how you can work to

strengthen your food system, contact your Cooperative Extension Service office for learning opportunities and a reading list on related topics. By joining the conversation about community food systems, you may find a new appreciation for everyday food.

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Janet Mullins, Ph.D., R.D., L.D.
Associate Professor
Extension Specialist in Food and Nutrition