

FOOD SYSTEMS & SECURITY

LEARNING CIRCLE SUMMARY

Wednesday, May 8, 2024

Climate change will continue to impact agriculture sending shocks throughout the food system and revealing vulnerabilities to food access and security. The Upper Peninsula seems particularly vulnerable with relatively little food production compared to other regions, and our geographic isolation from primary areas of food production. Primary concerns include access to and availability of food, as well as economic losses due to climate change impacts that harm regional food exports that do exist and result in even greater reliance on food imports from other regions. How might our community develop a more resilient food system with greater food security amidst impacts of climate change?

THE IDEAL VISION FOR OUR REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEM FUTURE

Participants shared their ideal vision for a local food system future (the next 10-25 years), with a shared focus on creating thriving farms that boost production while providing easier access to diverse, healthy foods without depleting land resources. These visions emphasized sustainable growth by protecting current mid-sized farms, preserving farmland, improving soil quality, and supporting regenerative agricultural practices. Key themes included:

Exploration of Non-Traditional Food Production: Supporting methods such as indoor growing, aquaculture, foraging, and container gardening. Emphasizing resilient growing techniques like hydroponics, season extension, and advanced technology to reduce fossil fuel dependency and ensure food storage and USDA processing facilities.

Regional Distribution Network: Establishing a regional commercial co-op or corporate distributor to wholesale locally-grown foods; consider mimicking historical models like the Cohodas Bros. cold storage warehouse in Ishpeming. This network would strengthen regional food system integration, creating demand and supporting local growers. The less miles food travels, the better.

Midwest Connections and Unified Vision: Strengthening ties across the Midwest to develop a unified purpose and organizational structures for long-term sustainability; building cohesive relationships among food systems workers, communities, and institutions, such as farm-to-school programs.

Education and Engagement: Engaging children and families through educational initiatives like school, community, and neighborhood gardens. Promoting cooking, healthy

eating, and the concept of food as medicine. Specific ideas included highlighting seasonal foods in farm-to-table restaurants and involving youth in agriculture and food production.

Value-Added Processing: Providing facilities for farmers to process, preserve, freeze, and dry crops to ensure year-round availability.

Policy Support and Cultural Shift: Implementing policies to support urban gardening, converting underutilized properties for agriculture, and fostering a cultural shift towards local and wild foods. Normalize native ecosystem farming that empowers individuals to grow their own food (bees, chickens, etc.).

Extended Growing Seasons and Food Recovery: Educating farmers on extended growing seasons and teaching families about food growing and preparation. Increasing community and neighborhood gardens, and developing food recovery systems to minimize waste.

Living Wage and Agricultural Tourism: Ensuring farmers earn a living wage and exploring agricultural tourism opportunities to further support the local food system.

The participants shared visions of the future that collectively aim to balance natural ecosystems with agricultural needs, ensuring sustainable, resilient, and locally-focused food production and distribution systems for decades to come.

FACTORS INFLUENCING OUR FOOD SYSTEM'S FUTURE

Participants explored and explained how our food system, and its resilience to climate change, will be influenced and impacted by several key factors simultaneously:

Transportation and Infrastructure: The development of a robust last-mile delivery system and improved distribution networks across the UP and Midwest are critical. Changes in mass transit, such as railways, and the shift from fossil fuels to electric fleets could affect food production costs. Increased property costs and infrastructure adjustments will also play significant roles.

Housing and Population Dynamics: The availability and affordability of housing will influence farming viability. Farmable land might be developed for residential purposes to meet the needs of a shifting population. Rising housing costs and population movements will impact both farming affordability and land availability.

Diet and Food Preferences: Future generations will have different dietary habits and food preferences, necessitating a re-evaluation of what can be grown and raised locally. Focusing on calorie-dense crops and animals will become important.

Economic Challenges: High entry costs and low returns make farming a challenging investment. Rising utility and operational costs, along with limited subsidies and difficulties in accessing funding, exacerbate this issue.

Demographic Shifts: An aging population, potential influx of climate refugees, and increased tourism will heighten food demand. The next generation's prioritization of food, coupled with the need for in-migration and seasonal labor, will influence who grows food.

Land Use and Environmental Concerns: Land use changes, such as mining, contamination, and pollution from large farms, will impact agricultural viability. Water scarcity and quality issues, particularly related to nearby mining and pipelines, are also concerns.

Cultural and Societal Norms: Education and knowledge is key to improving the system. Shifts in societal norms towards prioritizing food production over non-edible landscaping will be essential. Education efforts to change cultural attitudes and build community consensus are crucial.

Implementation of Sustainable Practices: Systems need to be established to make sustainable practices the default, such as providing compost bins, reducing costs, and lowering barriers to implementation. This includes fostering community engagement and integrating diverse viewpoints to support the envisioned future.

Overall, creating a resilient food system future will require addressing these multifaceted challenges through strategic planning, community involvement, and sustainable practices.

NEXT STEPS: HOW DO WE GET TO OUR IDEAL FUTURE?

To work toward a resilient food system future will require a combination of the right policy and partnerships. The following next steps are essential:

Enhanced Communication and Collaboration: Regular meetings among community leaders, municipal staff, private interests, and developers are crucial. Hosting symposiums to engage and educate stakeholders will facilitate wider sharing of insights with policymakers and the public. Foster supportive, inclusive, and solutions-oriented dialogues involving diverse perspectives, including youth and farmers. Promote the good work already happening to motivate others. Encourage students to create

podcasts and other media to share success stories. Create tools tailored to various audiences, taking action, and being transparent about current realities will be key to building a resilient food system future.

Securing Funding and Resources: Establishing a central coordinator and building capacity are necessary to actualize the ideal future. Seeking funding and resources is a key step.

Comprehensive Education Programs: Implement educational initiatives for all ages, starting from an early age. This includes integrating local food into school lunch programs, teaching agriculture in schools, and life skills such as cooking and nutrition. Engaging vulnerable populations and providing outreach through institutions like NMU are vital. We should also explore the use of school cafeteria kitchens for processing crops and enhancing cooking and agriculture programming in schools. Additionally, eco-garden tours, sustainability education, and water conservation discussions should be promoted.

Community Engagement and Neighborhood Governance Models: Encouraging small community and neighborhood projects to expose people to different ways of thinking. Organizing neighborhood garden governance models to facilitate hyper-local conversations, shared resources (e.g., compost sites, seed sharing, tool libraries), and policy development.

Deep Community Building: Creating critical connections through entities like the UP Food Exchange (UPFE) and restarting its policy committee. Integrating efforts with other initiatives, such as growing under solar arrays, will build momentum. Plowshare is the UPFE's newsletter and could be a useful forum for connecting with local farmers. Other organizations are ready to connect (e.g., MSU Extension, UPCAP, Lions Clubs, Partridge Creek Farm, etc.). While farmers are at capacity, maybe our community can develop programming and facilitate/coordinate to expand successes.

Taxing, Zoning and Ordinance Adjustments: Tweaking taxing and zoning laws to support small-scale agriculture and updating planning ordinances to permit urban gardening. Amending local zoning for more flexibility in food production by homeowners, small businesses, and small communities is essential.

These steps collectively aim to build a resilient and sustainable local food system through collaboration, education, community engagement, policy support, and effective communication.