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The Support Ecosystem for Regional Food Network Entrepreneurship

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Arguably, regional food networks (RFNs) represent multiple kinds and levels of entrepreneurship. There is the network coordinator, acting as a social entrepreneur by maintaining the mission and values of the RFN while providing leadership, mediating disputes, and innovating (Lyons and Wyckoff, 2014). There are the producers, who must think and act entrepreneurially as they manage the land and production. Those who add value must recognize and act upon the needs of prospective customers through innovation. Distributors and retailers must understand the entrepreneurship of identifying and capturing markets. Every player in a modern RFN must be entrepreneurial if the network is to be competitive. As a result, a host of support organizations have popped up across the landscape to reinforce the entrepreneurial activities of RFNs, creating a support ecosystem. These support organizations assist entrepreneurs in the RFN by providing access to equipment and infrastructure; business development; debt and equity capital; entrepreneur coaching, counseling, and mentoring; network building; and policy advocacy. They include entities such as kitchen incubators, microenterprise development programs, gap financing programs, small business development centers, SCORE chapters, food innovation labs, programs to connect food processors and retailers, business pitch competitions, and cooperative development programs, among others. However, this ecosystem is not necessarily transparent to RFN entrepreneurs, nor is the purpose and efficacy of the ecosystem's component parts well understood.

In order to make RFN support ecosystems understandable to the entrepreneurs they serve, we use two variables that describe the organizations within an ecosystem—policy level (local, state, sub-state regional, multi-state regional and national) and function—as coordinates for mapping the support ecosystem in matrix form. We then examine selected organizations that make up these ecosystems. This review is not meant to be comprehensive; rather, it attempts to provide a few concrete examples of representative organizations that are supporting agriculture- or food-related entrepreneurial initiatives at various policy levels and to examine the types of activities that they undertake in doing so. We offer an overall assessment of the strengths and limitations of these entrepreneurship support activities, and we make recommendations for ways that RFN entrepreneurs can use them more effectively.

Mapping the Activities of RFN Organizations

Support organizations for RFNs vary in terms of size and scope. They run the gamut, from broadly connecting policy thinkers across the country to focusing on developing farming talent in local minority groups. The approach here is to classify these organizations along the two dimensions noted above: the geographic scope of the organization's focus and the types of activities for which the organization provides support. We identified these patterns by reviewing over 40 specific organizations and programs, including U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs, state government initiatives, university extension programs, and nonprofit organizations. These are of course only a selection of the myriad groups and activities extant nationwide; however, these organizations were chosen to reflect both common activities as well as those noteworthy in some way.

Geographic Breakdown

Support organizations can be categorized into five geographic designations based on target audience: whom the organizations' programs are meant to serve and where they are accessible.

<i>National</i>	Covers organizations that have a national focus, or are in service to actors that can be from any part of the US
<i>Multi-state Regional</i>	Organizations that focus on a region that encompasses multiple states
<i>State</i>	Organizations that serve actors within the boundaries of a given state
<i>Sub-state regional</i>	Efforts that encompass parts of different states or smaller areas within a state
<i>Local</i>	Organizations that operate at the city/county level and below

Types of Activities

For all of the organizations reviewed, we categorized the types of work they do in support of agriculture- or food-related entrepreneurship using five general categories:

<i>Government</i>	National policy delivery or programs in support of such policies
<i>Policy</i>	Policy lobbying and advocacy
<i>Networking</i>	Creating and fostering connections between actors
<i>Financing</i>	Loan programs, direct financing
<i>Incubation</i>	Development programs, education, business training, technical assistance, equipment and infrastructure access

The work of RFN entrepreneurship support organizations is not exclusive to any one of the above categories; for some of these organizations, the lines we draw are purely artificial. This is to be expected, given the very nature of the businesses that these organizations seek to assist. For organizations that support burgeoning entrepreneurial activities, this means that they will naturally support the whole business across its different facets. Though most of the organizations we review have a core competency, it is not uncommon for them to be active in other areas. The delineations we make also do not preclude some functional overlap between them; for example, a mentorship program to develop young farmers could possibly fit into the networking, financing, and incubation categories. Nevertheless, we believe the general groupings to be reliable and instructive. To further elaborate:

- **Government activities:** This category covers the work of the USDA, namely programs and services available through its Rural Development (RD) arm. USDA-RD offers several grant and loan programs that are relevant for agriculture and food entrepreneurs.
- **Policy activities:** These include political action committees, policy creation and advocacy, lobbying, and creating/participating in case studies. These activities do not center around one particular actor but are undertaken to influence local, state, and national policies.
- **Networking activities:** Communication to, for, and about agriculture and food entrepreneurship is observed in many ways across organizations. Some methods are meant to spread best practices or strengthen knowledge about a cause (for example, conferences, newsletters, webinars), while other activities are about building business relationships and markets (for example, farm-to-school programs, market-matching programs).
- **Financing activities:** Organizations that have access to capital and are involved in direct lending to entrepreneurial businesses, from revolving loan funds to term loans. Financing activities could be sponsored with other institutions, such as government lenders or private banks, but at least some capital comes from the organizations themselves.
- **Incubation activities:** This category covers the widest range of support activities, encompassing business development assistance in various forms (in other words, knowledge as well as physical capital and infrastructure). Examples include new farmer programs, community food processing centers, land assistance, technical advice, and business planning.

Figure 1. Entrepreneurship Support Organization Matrix

	Government (National policy delivery/support)	Policy (policy lobbying, advocacy)	Networking (creating and fostering connections)	Financing (loan programs, direct financing)	Incubation (development programs, training, technical assistance, equipment and infrastructure access)
National					
Non-profit					
National					
Business Alliance for Local Living Economies					
University					
National					
Agricultural Marketing Resource Center					
New Entry Sustainable Farming Project					
USDA					
National					
Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program					
Business & Industry Loan Guarantees					
Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program					
Farm Service Agency - Farm Loan Analysis					
Food and Nutrition Service - Farm to School Grant Program					
Rural Business Development Grants					
Rural Business Investment Program					
Rural Cooperative Development Grant Program					
Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant Program					
Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program					
Value Added Producer Grants					
Multistate Regional					
Non-profit					
Northeast					
Natural Capital Investment Fund					
Plains					
Rocky Mountain Farmers Union					
Southeast					
Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund					
State					
Non-profit					
Midwest					
Indiana Cooperative Development Center					
Kentucky Center for Agriculture and Rural Development					
Latino Economic Development Center					
Northeast					
The Center for an Agricultural Economy					
Virginia Foundation for Agriculture, Innovation and Rural Sustainability					
Plains					
Value Added Agriculture Development Center					
State Government					
Midwest					
Kentucky Proud					
University					
Southeast					
Center for Environmental Farming Systems					
LSU AgCenter Food Incubator					
Substate Regional					
Non-profit					
Midwest					
Appalachian Center for Economic Networks					
Great Lakes Ag-Tech Business Incubator					
Pacific West					
Enterprise for Equity (Agri-preneur Business Planning Program)					
Northwest Agriculture Business Center					
Plains					
La Semilla Food Center					
Lake County Community Development Corporation					
Local					
Non-profit					
Midwest					
The Kinsman Farm					
Northeast					
Groundswell Center					
Intervale Center					
Pacific West					
Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA)					
Plains					
Cultivate Kansas City					
South Valley Economic Development Center's Mixing Bowl					

Figure 1 provides a matrix that demonstrates the interaction of these factors and affords the ability to map all RFN entrepreneurship support organizations in a region or nationally.

Examples of RFN Entrepreneurship Support Organizations across the Matrix

The five organizations reviewed here were chosen because they are representative of the diversity of service providers within our geographic scope and activity framework. The diversity of these organizations is not limited to those factors but also lies in the regions in which they are based and in the population density of the areas they serve.

Geographically, these five organizations are located in the Southwest, Midwest, Northeast, and Southeast regions of the United States, covering operations in an area as small as a single neighborhood to as large as a multi-state region. Organizations that operate in urban, suburban, and rural environments are all included. The types of activities that they undertake are similarly varied, including new farmer training programs, business development initiatives, community outreach, and funding supports.

Kinsman Farm, Cleveland, Ohio

Geographic level: Local

Types of activities: Incubation

Kinsman Farm likely has the most focused scope in terms of geography and purpose. Located in Cleveland's Kinsman neighborhood, their mission is to develop and support agricultural enterprise in an urban environment (Kinsman Farm, 2014a). The Farm has been active since 2010 and was developed as a joint effort between the Ohio State University Extension, the City of Cleveland, a local conservation nonprofit (West Creek Conservancy), and a local nonprofit development organization (Burten, Bell, and Carr Development).

As an incubator farm focused on developing new farming businesses, Kinsman Farm offers a "safety net" by providing land and support to small, beginning urban farmers who may not be ready or able to jump into larger-area or larger-scale commercial farming. Prospective tenants are required to take a training program and to provide a business plan. If approved, tenants are granted a lease for approximately 0.25-acre plots of land to develop their new business, with continuing technical advice provided by on-site demonstration areas run by Ohio State Extension. In addition to the lease, all tenant farmers have a responsibility to help with overall farm maintenance (Kinsman Farm, n.d.).

Kinsman Farm has about 6 acres, with roughly 17 plots available to farmer partners. At present, the farm hosts a dozen operations, with a mix of nonprofits, partnerships, and sole proprietorships. Most farms grow mixed fruits and vegetables, but an egg producer and an apiary are among the tenants (Kinsman Farm, 2014b).

Groundswell Center for Local Food and Farming, Ithaca, NY

Geographic level: Local

Types of activities: Incubation, networking

The Groundswell Center is a project of the Center for Transformative Action, an Ithaca-based nonprofit that seeks to develop communities in Ithaca and Tompkins County that are "socially just, ecologically sound, and work for everyone" (Groundswell Center, n.d.-a). In that vein, Groundswell's mission is to promote accessible, healthy, and ecologically sound food and agriculture systems to and for the community. Groundswell's programs revolve around education, with an emphasis on experiential education. The center offers a wide variety of courses and seminars, covering everything from Farming 101 to more advanced and specific technical training for farmers, including basic community outreach learning programs and events.

Incubation and development are related parts of Groundswell's ultimate mission in bringing new members into the local food system. The incubator farm at Groundswell is comprehensive, offering farmland, access to equipment, continuing education, mentorship, and training as part of a three-year program for aspiring farmers. The cost to a

program participant is nominal, but prospective participants must have some sort of demonstrated farming experience as well as a commercially oriented business plan (Groundswell Center, n.d.-b). A notable aspect of this program is its socially conscious orientation: Though open to all applicants, priority is given to potential farmers that belong to socially or economically disadvantaged groups (e.g., people of color, veterans) (Groundswell Center, 2015).

For farm business development, Groundswell offers a business-planning course meant for beginning and experienced farmers that have farming experience but need guidance on business aspects (Groundswell Center, n.d.-c). Participation in the development program is not limited to those already with or able to afford land; connections are made to lenders and investors through connections established by the program.

La Semilla Food Center, Anthony, New Mexico

Geographic level: Sub-state regional

Types of activities: Incubation, networking, policy

La Semilla Food Center's focus on building local food systems concentrates on increasing the involvement of different parts of the community across the system, with an emphasis on youth and young adults. Based in the Mesilla Valley, La Semilla's programs are active in the area between and within the cities of Las Cruces, New Mexico, and El Paso, Texas (La Semilla Food Center, n.d.-a). La Semilla seeks to engage and promote local food and agriculture efforts by developing farmers' markets, coordinating farm-to-school programs, running a demonstration farm, and engaging in policy advocacy.

La Semilla's focus on youth is reflected in much of their programming. Their on-site demonstration farm hosts a summer day camp program for younger children. For youth at the high school level, La Semilla runs a semester-long course, called Raices (Spanish for "roots"), that acts as a hands-on "food systems primer," offering experiences in all areas of the Center's interests: food production, nutrition education, policy advocacy, and leadership development. Youth and young adults with aspirations beyond Raices can apply to be a part of La Semilla's Food and Farm Apprenticeships, which combine actual employment and a stipend with further education, mentorship, and skills development (La Semilla Food Center, n.d.-b).

Connection to younger members of the community is also promoted through public institutions. The Center runs several initiatives with educational partners for students, their families, and teachers/educators, including family cooking nights, school gardens, and edible education programs. As an intermediary, La Semilla also provides expert assistance to schools in setting up farm-to-school programs with local providers (La Semilla Food Center, n.d.-c).

The Center's Farm Fresh program works to improve connections within the food system by developing potential markets for local farmers, where they fulfill the roles of analysts and marketers in the value chain between producers and potential clients (markets, restaurants, stores).

La Semilla Food Center is a charter member of the Mesilla Valley Food Policy Council, engaging in policy advocacy and engagement with local communities and their elected officials.

Kentucky Center for Agriculture and Rural Development, Elizabethtown, KY

Geographic level: State

Types of activities: Incubation, networking

The Kentucky Center for Agriculture and Rural Development, or KCARD, is a nonprofit organization that concentrates on improving agricultural and rural businesses through addressing their business development-related needs. Consulting and support are given for new and existing Kentucky businesses at various stages of maturity (Kentucky Center for Agriculture and Rural Development, n.d.-a).

KCARD is a source of knowledge and partnership for producers and businesses that can benefit from their expertise in planning and analysis. They maintain an online "toolkit" of documents and resources on business development topics specifically for Kentucky-based businesses (Kentucky Center for Agriculture and Rural

Development, n.d.-b), but the organization is very proactive in its direct work with its clients. Businesses in the early stages of development can take advantage of KCARD's involved "hands-on approach" in creating feasibility studies (marketing, management, and technical), management and operations analyses, legal documents, and personnel management. For more-established businesses, several services are available, including general consulting, record keeping, cost analysis, marketing plans, and board training. General business skill training geared toward individuals, like training in QuickBooks or Excel, is offered as well (Kentucky Center for Agriculture and Rural Development, n.d.-c). Though KCARD does provide direct funding, their Agribusiness Grant Facilitation program helps agribusinesses connect to and apply for previously untapped grants and funds.

Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, Epes, Alabama

Geographic level: Multi-state regional

Types of activities: Incubation, networking, policy

The nonprofit Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund represents the interests of member cooperative institutions in their mission of developing low-income and rural communities through cooperatives. Though its programs are accessible to all low-income and family farmers, the Federation's membership draws from and focuses on the historically underserved black community (Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, 2016). The Federation represents cooperatives from nine states in the Southern and Southeastern United States: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas. Funding comes from a mix of private, nonprofit, and government sources (Federation of Southern Cooperatives Land Assistance Fund, 2015).

The work of the Federation focuses on three areas: cooperative economic development, land retention, and advocacy (Federation of Southern Cooperatives Land Assistance Fund, n.d.-a). The cooperative economic development effort of the Federation involves work in all three of those categories. The Federation conducts active outreach through its field/state offices to identify socially and economically disadvantaged farmers that could benefit from its agricultural expertise and business assistance, encouraging the formation of cooperatives when appropriate. Federation specialists provide one-on-one counseling to help produce business plans, complete loan applications, and take advantage of available resources. The Federation also coordinates technical workshops and networking conferences on specific topics and themes relevant to its membership (Federation of Southern Cooperatives Land Assistance Fund, n.d.-b).

Most cooperative development effort flows through the Federation's own Rural and Training Research Center, a property in Alabama that houses farm, forestry, and agroforestry demonstration sites as well as meeting space. The Federation uses the Center to run workshops and programs that train members on technical, financial, and business issues related to cooperatives and small farm management, including advice on sustainable agriculture, land assistance, credit union formation, cooperative formation, marketing, and advocacy. These programs contribute to the development and growth of new and existing rural food communities.

Observable Trends within These RFN Players

Certain common themes can be observed among the organizations that make up the RFN support ecosystem, and these can be instructive in furthering thinking about the driving forces behind RFN organizations in general.

Activist or Mission-Based Action

RFNs can be thought of as value chains that exist as alternatives to the status quo, namely the global industrial food model. As such, organizations that choose to be a part of an RFN chain likely have objectives beyond a standard bottom line: policy concerns such as food sovereignty, environmental sustainability, and community economic development are all examples of issues that align closely to their missions. Commitment to a local food system is not a secondary concern for these organizations, and this is reflected in the activities in which the organizations take part. In light of this, RFN entrepreneurship support organizations and the players in the value chain they serve are acting as social entrepreneurs—mission-based enterprises that use markets to address social issues (Lyons and Wyckoff, 2014; Kickul and Lyons, 2016).

Entrepreneurial Innovation

These organizations fill gaps that they may see in the system or pursue new, mission-oriented activities. That impetus to provide an alternative to the conventional system leads to innovative thinking throughout the value chain. In addition, the local focus allows these organizations to take advantage of unique local opportunities. By drawing on these strengths, organizations are finding new ideas that expand the RFN. For example, Kinsman Farm created its own combination of urban farming, new farmer incubation, agricultural education, and local orientation to transform what had been just another rundown and neglected city lot in the middle of Cleveland into a promising symbol of urban agriculture.

Underserved Populations and Accessibility

RFN entrepreneurship support organizations are open to working with all classes of people and, importantly, groups of people that may have been previously unaware of or excluded from existing, dominant systems. Tailoring services toward the less-advantaged or less-served populations can be explicitly part of an organization's mission, as it is for the Federation of Southern Cooperatives in supporting African-American farmers and for the Groundswell Center in creating opportunities for economically disadvantaged groups. Regardless of the groups being served, it is important to note that acknowledging and working for these groups can have an effect on expanding the reach and value of RFNs. These organizations impart values, skills, and resources to groups that can help build a stronger and more participatory food system. Whether the new contributors being brought into the circle are urban farmers, youth, or people of color, proactively being open and inclusive can lead to sustainable outcomes for RFNs.

Expanding Knowledge In and Of Food Systems

The concept of scaling knowledge can be seen across the activities of these organizations. Their goal is to promote and grow local food systems that bring benefits to participants and consumers; rather than simply teaching a skill, they make sure that the skill enters, becomes part of, and grows the network. For example, when the La Semilla Food Center runs education courses at schools, they also work to supply local food to that school's cafeteria and give students who excel in the course a route to becoming local farmers. Another example of this is the Groundswell Center, which not only has a wide range of courses to help existing producers but also brings new farmers into the community through training in their incubation program.

Networking

A big part of effectively expanding the food system is making and maintaining connections among different actors and institutions; given that need, it makes sense that organizations share a networking mindset (Groundswell Center, n.d.-a; La Semilla Food Center, n.d.-c; Kentucky Center for Agriculture and Rural Development, n.d.-a; Federation of Southern Cooperatives Land Assistance Fund, n.d.-b). Each actor has different core competencies, but within the breadth of services they provide, most feel comfortable promoting networking activities beyond those outlined in their mission statements. An organization could be acting as an intermediary between producers and consumers (as La Semilla does in promoting its farm-to-school programs), facilitating introductions between existing actors (as KCARD does in helping businesses find financing), or sharing best practices (as the Federation of Southern Cooperatives does in running conferences for its members).

Institutional Backing and Visibility

In addition to the networking functions undertaken as part of operations, it is important to note that the organizations that make up regional food systems do not operate independent of other institutions. Such links can provide significant advantages. There are larger scale resources available to and active in supporting RFN actors at all levels, whether they are land-grant academic institutions, nonprofit foundations, or local/state/federal governments. For example, the USDA provides funding support to each of the organizations highlighted here in some way, and each organization had at least two partners providing additional financial support.

Opportunities

Numerous food and/or agricultural actors support entrepreneurship in RFNs, providing value at all levels and in many ways. Each actor chooses an area of the value chain to which they can contribute. Each individual

organization has a valuable role to play, but none is, or can be, sufficient to meet all the needs of RFN players. Local food systems will exhibit degrees of fragmentation and siloization of existing organizations simply because of the unavoidable differences in the organizations' size and scope. However, the more these organizations are treated as a system, the more opportunities are revealed: opportunities for networking, improved referral, cross-community information sharing, and a more transparent apparatus for service delivery. Choosing a holistic approach to evaluating the efficacy of the value chain will lead to a more successful food network.

The biggest opportunity to improve the power of the regional food value chain might simply lie in proper identification (that is, clearly identifying and classifying extant organizations and their capabilities). Proper identification of where an organization fits, conveyed to others in the network, will increase efficiency in the value chain. Role identification alone will not be sufficient to maximize the capability of the whole system, but it could increase performance and reveal where assistance gaps exist in the chain.

Two characteristics of RFN organizations may hinder clear identification from naturally occurring within the network: mission drift and a lesser amount of cross-level/cross-functional networking. "Mission drift" describes a situation in which an organization is active in areas beyond their core competencies and mission because they feel there are no other viable suppliers within their network, or they are unaware of another player that would be a better fit. Many of these groups have ambitious missions and/or an underdeveloped value chain, so they may be active in areas that could or should be out of scope. Therefore, it may be unclear in a network what needs are truly being met versus which could be improved upon. Clearly identifying the participants and their competencies within the network will improve all parties' understanding of what organizations are truly capable of and what opportunities exist within the value chain.

Again, RFN organizations are proactive in networking efforts overall, as they all share the goal of establishing a robust and sustainable alternative to the global model. Consequently, the opportunity for identification will not be to bring organizations into a network from isolation but to help better understand where the organization fits within functional or operational bounds.

This is where a matrix of organizational supports will be useful. Using this method to clarify the roles of RFN organizations makes it much easier to think about a multitude of service providers and how they can fit into a cohesive system. The benefits of a RFN can be realized, as opportunities within the value chain can be coordinated and matched to specific players.

Recommendations

It is clear that there are creative, dedicated, and dynamic players at work in the RFNs today; those highlighted in this review are evidence of the actors providing key contributions at the intersections of many different levels of geography, size, and scope. However, these actors are not always visible to the RFN entrepreneurs they seek to assist, nor are they networked as effectively as they could be. By mapping them by geographic area served and type of assistance provided, RFN coordinators can make this group of assistance providers more transparent and lay the groundwork for a seamless system of service provision, adding value to the entire RFN. The examples presented here should be useful in thinking about points of connection for building such a system. The matrix offered in this article may be used as a template for facilitating the process. In light of this, we recommend that RFN coordinators take the following steps:

1. Identify the support organizations that serve entrepreneurs in their value chains by geography and types of service(s) offered;
2. Map these organizations using the matrix presented;
3. Look for service gaps and service overlap;
4. Look for existing connections among organizations as well as opportunities to build new connections; and
5. Facilitate interaction among support organizations that foster efficiency and effectiveness, while allowing these organizations to participate actively in building their own social capital.

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