



A REGIONAL IMPERATIVE: THE CASE FOR REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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‘R egional food systems’ appears with increasing frequency in scholarly works and among food system practitioners. Yet regional food systems are understudied and undervalued. Much more attention to regionalism and regional food systems is necessary to create more sustainable, equitable, and resilient food systems for all. Building from the authors’ 2010 paper, “It takes a region... Exploring a regional food systems approach: A working paper,” this greatly expanded report explores the concepts, practices, challenges, and promise of regional food systems. The report’s focus is on the Northeast U.S., a laboratory for regional food systems thinking and action, but it also describes and gives examples of regional food systems development across the country. The arguments in favor of regional approaches and explorations apply to all regions and embracing them could not be more imperative to address contemporary conditions.

Regions are geographic places whose features and functions can be described. Regionalism, or “thinking regionally,” is an approach—a strategic framework based on scale, geography, and systems thinking applied to food system change. Both place and approach are essential. That said, many food system issues transcend regionalism: a regionally focused food system is not inherently more socially just or ecologically principled. The report focuses on how structural food system issues manifest at the regional scale and how regionalism can contribute to positive food system change.

The report was prepared during the COVID-19 pandemic and heightened attention to the Black Lives Matter movement. Each has shined a glaring light on the vulnerabilities and inequities of food systems at all scales, and of the deeply embedded structural oppression that marginalized communities face. Both force new examination of how and by whom food is produced, processed, transported, and purchased, and of the gaping flaws in food access and security.

Closely examining the regional scale does not slight the importance of ‘local.’ Yet, as interest in regional food systems has increased, the conflation of ‘local’ and ‘regional’ food and food systems is a continuing problem. The differences are important, because ‘local’ and ‘regional’ are not the same. Conflating or confusing the terms prevents analysts and advocates from touting ‘local’ on its own merits, and from making the case for ‘regional’ food systems as strong as it could be. Furthermore, ‘local’ has many positive connotations (not all of which are grounded in fact), and significant cachet in the marketplace, while ‘regional’ resonates to a lesser degree. If the terms continue to be confused or perceived as identical, and regional is not seen as a legitimate and necessary food systems framework, it will lose its potential to achieve a regional food systems vision, and to implement the numerous practical strategies and benefits it offers.

In food systems, ‘regional’ is larger geographically than ‘local,’ and also larger in terms of functions: volume, variety, supply chains, markets, food needs, land use, governance, and policy. A regional food system operates at various scales and geographies toward greater self-reliance. Thinking regionally provides the opportunity to frame food production, needs, and economies in a larger context—within locales and regions, and across state borders, as well as among and across regions, however they may be described and bounded.

Like ‘local,’ regions can be described in many ways, including by their natural resources, land uses, and sociocultural, economic and political dimensions. Regions are composed of multiple ‘locals,’ but are more than the sum of them. Regions overlap; they “nest.” Their boundaries are fluid. Agri-food systems are characterized by fixed geographic factors such as climate conditions, topography, soil types, suitable farmland, water, and other natural resources. Land and other input costs, farm scale, and crop options play out at the regional level. Regional differences, for example, in transportation, processing, and distribution infrastructure; local, domestic, and international market access; as well as food preferences, security, and access shape a region’s comparative food system advantages and challenges.

The report details many characteristics of the Northeast region, made up of twelve states and the District of Columbia. With less land to feed more people than other regions, the Northeast and its subregions have both advantages and challenges to building more sustainable and resilient food systems. The report focuses on land-based food production, while noting the significant contributions to and from the region, from marine and freshwater fisheries, as well as from fiber, nursery, and other nonfood agricultural products. This report acknowledges the Northeast region’s particular history of exploitation and dispossession, and contributes to confronting the contemporary challenges around systemic racism in the Northeast’s food systems.

The report posits the attributes of ideal regional food systems, including that they:

- Produce a volume and variety of foods to meet as many of the dietary needs and preferences of the population as possible within the resource capacity of the region.
- Lead to self-reliance, but not self-sufficiency.
- Go “beyond local,” providing more volume, variety, and market options than local.
- Build regionally relevant solutions around equity, justice, and stewardship.
- Exhibit attributes of both conventional and alternative systems.

- Connect with both local and national and global levels.
- Reject one-size-fits-all agriculture and food policies.
- Consider scale, markets, and values, not just geography.
- Provide more affordable, appropriate, good food options to mainstream markets.
- Encourage decentralization in markets, infrastructure, and governance.
- Develop new institutions and forms of governance.

Diversity, resilience, and sustainability—fundamental to systems thinking—are the core of a complex regional food systems framework. Regions must determine which resilience characteristics already exist and which need development. Social justice—broadly referring to the fair and equitable distribution of political, economic and social rights, benefits, power and opportunity in a society—is a central value and another core concern in regional food systems development.

These overarching and unifying themes are reflected in six dimensions that describe the current conditions, salient elements, and potential of regional food systems. These six dimensions are:

- **Food needs and supply.** Knowing a region’s food production capacity makes it possible for all involved to understand the parameters within which they are working and offers a pragmatic understanding of the complementary needs for food imports from national and global sources. The Northeast, for example, can produce only a small percentage of its food needs because of its large, dense population areas and small arable land base. Meeting a larger proportion of the region’s food demand would lead to greater regional food security, self-reliance, and carrying capacity. Meeting this demand requires more diversified production of multiple crop and animal foods suited to the region, more regional food supply chains, and a greater emphasis on midsize farms and businesses. Urban food production has a modest but important role to play in the regional food supply, along with significant food supply chain activities in urban and peri-urban zones, including processing, storage, and wholesale and retail sales.
- **Natural resources.** The long-term ability to sustain—and in some regions, increase—the production of crops and animals depends on a sufficient and well cared for natural resource base. One serious threat to agricultural production is climate change. Its effects on crop health and yields, water supply, livestock and fisheries productivity, and supply chain function will vary by crop and region. These effects need to be addressed through regionally appropriate climate mitigation and adaptation that often will be expensive.

Such efforts will require subsidies and incentives to smaller and lower-income farmers for them to remain viable.

Land use, protection, and access (framed in the context of land justice) for agriculture are priority issues across U.S. regions. Local-level policies on farmland protection and expansion (or restoration) should be integrated with efforts at the regional level, similar to the way many water policies are considered in regions across the country (e.g., watershed and conservation districts). Institutional diversity at a regional scale provides the optimal degree of resilience when complex natural resource problems arise. Biodiversity at a regional scale is a critical contributor to resilience by offering redundancy and spreading risk across and between regions.

- **Economic development.** A hallmark of a regionally focused food system is that more economic returns stay within both the rural and urban areas of the region, and that such returns are distributed equitably. Regions are crucial units of analysis for mapping land use and growth patterns and trends, assessing agricultural markets, and promoting smart-growth initiatives. Appropriate conclusions from research assessments are not possible without distinguishing ‘local’ from ‘regional’. Regional planning can transcend understandable but often short-sighted and parochial (i.e., local) advocacy, and can develop critical linkages among urban, peri-urban, and city areas. Regional food supply chains offer much-needed resilience to regions through diversity and redundancy. They preserve the values of “place,” offer greater supply, variety, and dependability than local markets, and are economic engines for midsize farms. Public and private economic development entities and funders must increase their support for food supply chain entrepreneurs and new business models through multiple financing mechanisms, education, and training. Finally, both import substitution and exports are critical to economic viability in the food sector. Inter-and intraregional trade are essential.
- **Infrastructure.** Insufficient and inappropriate supply chain infrastructure is seen as the biggest barrier to building strong and resilient regional food systems. Among the needs are more terminal and public markets across regions; increased food processing capacity, including slaughterhouses and packing plants to bolster the viability of midsize farms through scaling up and increasing production; upgraded roads, bridges, and broadband services; improved collaborations among shippers, trucking firms, and wholesale buyers; better logistics to improve the efficiency of midscale distributors; and more attention to the role played by independent supermarkets in rural areas and small towns. The purchasing power of all types of public and private institutions should be harnessed to expand regional food procurement. And efforts should be made to align branding activities to create market synergy across a region.
- **Social justice.** A regional lens creates appreciation for a region’s particular historical context, demographics, and cultures, and paves the way for place-appropriate actions to address the manifestations and consequences of racism and other forms

of social injustice. The regional framework proposed in the report addresses food needs, access, and security, along with fairness and opportunity for all players in the food chain. The disparities uncovered by the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement highlight the need for substantive change in many food-related matters. A food justice framework at the regional level can be used to advocate for change, and tie concerns to other structural issues such as in housing, education, and public health. Regions can—and must—confront their particular histories of oppression, and center racial equity throughout the food system, from removing barriers faced by farmers from marginalized communities to supply chain operations to food availability and preferences.

- **Human and political capacity.** Regionalism and regional food system approaches must be more firmly embedded in governance, including government institutions such as regional development organizations and councils of government, private-sector food industry and trade groups, and civil society entities, such as nonprofit organizations and food policy councils. A regional approach means creating multisector coalitions based on place rather than silos, promoting region-suited federal policies, thinking strategically rather than parochially, and strengthening regional industry and provider networks. This needs to be done with trust and skilled facilitation, because interests within a defined region and between regions may conflict. While regulations and understandable loyalties get in the way of regional cooperation, more can be done to overcome these barriers.

Regional food systems require collaborations across multiple scales in public and private domains; they can start by taking advantage of existing multistate entities and frameworks. A city region may be a powerful construct to advance regional governance for food systems. Few groups explicitly prioritize or champion regional. Governments must have the vision and political will to establish, develop, and maintain multistakeholder structures at multiple scales, and their diverse constituents must pressure them to do so. State governments must work with neighboring states on issues ranging from transportation to climate mitigation to marketing, and they should share models and best practices. Federal agencies can do more to foster and promote regionalism and food systems. Policies are needed that (1) address specific regional needs and priorities; (2) accommodate regional differences and foster regional solutions in general; and (3) do not disadvantage any particular region.

Moving to a more regional food paradigm is not an easy task. The process of regionalizing food systems requires the combined engagement of experts, practitioners, and advocates from planning, finances, governance, economic development, logistics, policy, and other arenas. Regional food systems can be strengthened if relevant actors use systems approaches to transcend boundaries and strengthen urban-rural linkages. This requires champions in governments, supply chains, nonprofits, and research and educational institutions, and among consumers.

The language conundrum that conflates local and regional undermines the comprehension of these essential concepts. Most people are not inclined to think “regionally.” Those most engaged in this work should strive for clarity about terms and concepts. Educating about regional food systems helps citizens to make system connections and can mobilize actions for change through the multiple entry doors that food systems offer. Thinking regionally can foster solidarity across diverse communities and interests. It can overcome the pitting of local against regional or metropolitan against rural.

Acting regionally requires receptivity to the concept, advantages, and applicability of regionalism. Regional action requires appropriate governance from the public and private sectors, including supply chain actors and cross-sector coalitions and other types of networks. It means thinking strategically, placing equity and anti-oppression as core guiding values. It requires balancing tensions and tradeoffs around efficiency and competing interests across all food system dimensions. It invites participation by all constituents in the work of reshaping food systems.

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