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## Local food hubs for alternative food systems: A case study from Santa Barbara County, California



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### A B S T R A C T

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The mainstream food system in the industrialized world is dominated by large, private corporations, and is highly concentrated spatially and structurally, resulting in high levels of production, but also many negative environmental and social externalities. There is growing interest in alternative food systems as a way to reduce these externalities and increase food system sustainability. Localization has become a favoured strategy of advocates for alternatives, and ranges from incremental changes from within the mainstream system to challenging that system by creating grassroots alternatives that prioritize social and environmental goals over economic ones. A major obstacle to localization is the lack of economic, organizational and physical structures of the appropriate scale for local aggregation and distribution of food. Local food hubs are emerging as an important tool for overcoming that obstacle by pooling food products from a number of smaller farms and delivering them to grocery stores, schools, hospitals and restaurants. The fundamental challenge of local hubs as grassroots alternatives to the mainstream is how to be economically viable within a system dominated by the goal of economic profit, while working for social and environmental goals that the mainstream doesn't value, or even works against. We first provide an overview of how hubs have been theorized, in terms of 'mainstream' vs. 'alternative' and large- vs. small-scale, and how in practice they are often hybrids. Our case study of the creation of a successful local food hub in Santa Barbara County, California, USA, includes the perspectives of key food service staff in a large institutional buyer (The University of California, Santa Barbara's Residential Dining Services) that played a key role in the growth of the hub, the owners of the local hub, and some of the small-scale farmers the hub purchased from. We conclude that keys for success included scaling up from direct marketing rather than scaling down from mainstream distribution, and the actors motivations to prioritize social and environmental over economic goals.

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### 1. Introduction

The mainstream food system in the industrialized world is dominated by large, private corporations, and is highly concentrated spatially and structurally, resulting in high levels of production, but also in many negative environmental and social externalities (Friedmann, 2009). It has become increasingly dominated by long-distance import and export (Saltmarsh and Wakeman, 2004), driven by economic globalization and relatively cheap energy (Martinez et al., 2010). Most people in the US obtain food from the mainstream food system—large grocery stores,

restaurants, and institutions such as college dining commons, workplace cafeterias and health care facilities, which typically source their food from centralized, regional or global distributors that buy from large-scale producers (Martinez et al., 2010).

There is growing interest in alternative food systems as a way to reduce these problems and increase food system environmental and social sustainability. Localization has become a favoured strategy of advocates for alternatives, with local food hubs often a key component, but with mixed results. For practitioners and researchers, therefore, the question is How can alternative local hubs be economically viable within a system dominated by large-scale national and global distribution networks, and therefore lacking supporting economic, organizational and physical structures of the appropriate scale, and at the same time successful in working for

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social and environmental goals that the mainstream doesn't value, or even works against?

While there is an increasing amount of research on food hubs, there are few detailed case studies of the creation of successful local hubs as alternatives to the mainstream food system. This article reports such a case study in Santa Barbara County (SBC), California. SBC is especially relevant to the debate about local food hubs because it is a major agricultural county producing an abundance of food, mostly produce (fruits and vegetables) year round. SBC agricultural production was valued at \$1.22 billion in 2010, which placed it in the top 1% of all counties in the US (SBC ACO, 2010). There is also an active localization movement in the county, but the food system remains dominated by the mainstream global system. For example, less than 5% of produce consumed in the county was grown in the county in 2009, while almost 99% of the produce grown in the county was exported out of the county (Cleveland et al., 2011). While it is typical in terms of the dominance of the mainstream global distribution system, it is unique in having the potential for supplying year round all the produce consumed in the county with produce grown in the county. This means that there are no environmental barriers to localization, at least for fruits and vegetables, so that analysis of alternatives can focus on the roles of physical scale and motivations in determining success.

We organized this paper by first defining 'local' food hubs, focussing on their relation to the debate about mainstream vs. alternative food systems, and give an overview of existing research on local hubs, stressing their hybrid nature (Section 2). We then present the case study of the development of a successful food hub in SBC, and the relationship of this success to the broader goals of hubs embodied in the motivations of the principle actors involved. These actors include Farmer Direct Produce (FDP), a local food hub that delivers to local customers, and buys mostly from local farmers (Section 4), the Residential Dining Service (RDS) at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) (Section 5), and small-scale local farmers who sell to FDP (Section 6). We conclude by drawing lessons for the role of local food hubs as alternatives to the mainstream food system (Section 7).

## 2. Understanding local food hubs as hybrids

Spatially local food systems in the US have been increasing dramatically as an alternative to the mainstream, led by direct sales between farmers and local customers, via CSAs, farm stands U-pick operations and farmers markets. However, direct marketing currently still accounts for a very small proportion of total food sales—according to the USDA, direct sales by farms was valued at \$1,029,160 in 2007, only 0.4% of total farm sales for that year (USDA NASS, 2009).<sup>1</sup> A major obstacle to localization is lack of economic, organizational and physical structures of the appropriate scale for moving locally grown food to local eaters. The places where nearly all food is bought are vertically linked physically and economically to a global food system. New ways of structuring food distribution hubs are increasingly being considered a key for overcoming this obstacle (Zajfen, 2008). Local food hubs are a means of aggregating and distributing food by pooling food products from a number of smaller farms and delivering them to grocery stores, schools, hospitals and restaurants.

<sup>1</sup> There is a dearth of accurate data on 'local' food distribution, in part because 'local' is usually defined so broadly and/or ambiguously. The USDA data probably underestimate the extent of local distribution (Cleveland et al., 2011). Low and Vogel present data on extent of 'local' sales, but include sales to 'regional distributors' which are undefined (2011).

A major challenge for local food hubs is the lack of supporting economic, organizational and physical structures of the appropriate scale. To meet this challenge, hubs as alternatives to the mainstream have to scale up from direct marketing, or scale down from large-scale distribution networks, while maintaining their motivations and goals for alternative food systems. This can be made more difficult by the move toward localization from within the mainstream food system, that seeks to capture increasing consumer demand, while sharing few if any of the goals of alternative localization efforts. Thus, local food hub initiatives have been categorized as either an 'idealistic' approach that challenges the basic assumptions of the mainstream by prioritizing environmental and social goals, or an 'instrumentalist' approach in response to 'consumer demand for local' which seeks to adjust the mainstream food system by reducing what have become 'unacceptable externalities' (Ilbery and Maye, 2005).

This tendency to think of the mainstream and alternative perspectives on hubs and the food system in dichotomous ways has been challenged as an 'overly simplistic binary contrast' (Hinrichs, 2000), and Izumi et al. (2010b) insisted that regionally-based food distributors ('food hubs') need to be analysed as hybrids between the two systems. In theory local hubs as hybrids have the potential to capture many of the advantages of both alternative direct marketing and the mainstream, large-scale distribution system, while minimizing the disadvantages of each (Table 1). A brief review of the literature on the theory and practice of local hubs shows how complex the situation can be.

### 2.1. Local food hubs theory

'Mainstream' and 'alternative' are widely used in the literature to describe contrasts in food systems, both in referring to the goals, motivations and values of those involved, and the economic, organizational and physical structures involved (Murdoch and Miele, 1999). Murdoch and Miele defined mainstream and alternative as 'zones' of production: 'standardized, specialized production processes responding to economic standards of efficiency and competitiveness on the one hand; localized, specialized production processes attempting to trade on the basis of environmental, nutritional, or health qualities on the other' (1999).

Karl Polanyi's analysis of the dominant market system has been widely used in social analysis of the food system (e.g. Friedmann, 2000; Izumi et al., 2010b), and is helpful in analysing local food hubs.<sup>2</sup> For the mainstream system to function, human behaviour needs to be motivated primarily by profit maximization signalled by prices, and not by criteria linked to other characteristics of land and labour, hidden behind the commodity-fiction. Polanyi's historical analysis led him to the idea that the mainstream market system engenders a social counter-movement (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]). Based primarily on Polanyi's broad theoretical framework, we define alternative food systems as this counter-movement, to the extent decision-making by actors in the system is based on prioritizing social and environmental goals over the

<sup>2</sup> Polanyi criticizes the idea of a self-regulating market, pointing at its weak theoretical foundations on the one hand (such as the 'commodity-fiction' of labour and land), and the ensuing dramatic social consequences of dismantling protective regulation mechanisms on the other hand. According to Polanyi, 'normally, the economic order is merely a function of the social order', meaning that the economy is embedded in social ties, and that 'to allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment ... would result in the demolition of society' (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]: 74).

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