

COMMENTARY ON COMMUNITY-BASED CIRCULAR FOOD SYSTEMS

Lessons from building a regional food system in Eastern Connecticut

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SPECIAL ISSUE

Community-Based
Circular Food SystemsSponsored by
the Thomas A. Lyson Center
for Civic Agriculture
and Food SystemsSubmitted September 26, 2024 / Revised October 2, 2024 / Accepted October 3, 2024 /
Published online March 19, 2025Citation: Clements, S. (2025). Lessons from building a regional food system in Eastern Connecticut [Commentary]. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 14(2), 263–268. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2025.142.030>

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Summary

This is a reflection on a small Connecticut-based nonprofit organization's attempt to scale its community-based work to a regional level through a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Regional Food Systems Partnership grant. Organized around five lessons learned, it addressed the challenges faced when building a regional network across diverse communities and geographies.

Keywords

community-based food systems, food system nonprofits, regional food system partnerships, community-based circular food systems

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Author Disclosure

Sydney Clements is the former director of the Windham Community Food Network.

Introduction

In 2021, the Windham Community Food Network (WCFN), a small nonprofit organization based in Windham, Connecticut, received a Regional Food Systems Partnership (RFSP) grant from the USDA in partnership with Grow Windham, FRESH New London, the Connecticut Food Systems Alliance, and Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut, all of which are organizations working to increase food justice in their respective communities. Our proposal, titled “Rooting Deep and Scaling Up: A Roadmap for Food System Equity and Viability in Eastern Connecticut,” was meant to leverage the consumer trends experienced during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic and scale them up to increase farmer economic viability and low-income consumer access to locally produced food in the region.

As many will remember, grocery stores were a difficult place to navigate in 2020, affected by supply-chain disruptions, item limits, and a seemingly ever-changing safety rules for customers. With the convenience of the industrial food system

removed, we saw many consumers seeking alternative methods of sourcing food. For example, local farmers reported having waitlists for their community supported agriculture (CSA) shares, selling out their spring seedling sales, and seeing higher attendance at farmers markets.

At the same time, we saw a spike in the need for food assistance programs and a desire among our community members to help their neighbors in need. The WCFN led crowd-sourced fundraising initiatives to support struggling restaurants to cater meals at pantries when the pantries lost volunteers. We also saw other innovations taking place, like sliding-scale CSA shares that subsidized shares for low-income families and even national programs like the USDA's "Farmers to Families" food box programs.¹

Our partnership sought to explore and build on these opportunities by convening producers, community members, stakeholders, and allies. This two-year project was to be divided into two phases:

- **Year 1: Rooting Deep:** Capture community innovations, needs, and opportunities through regional surveying, interviews, and asset mapping.
- **Year 2: Scaling Up:** Identify leverage points and develop them into regional projects, campaigns, and initiatives.

This essay is a personal reflection on what I learned from working on this project and does not necessarily reflect the views of the WCFN or any of our partnering organizations. The work we embarked on was one of the biggest challenges I have faced in my career to date. Navigating organizational alliances is messy, and while there is no clear pathway to success, I believe I have valuable insight to offer food systems leaders when it comes to working on large-scale regional projects in this work, trust and relationships are the most valuable resources toward building our circular economy.

Background

Prior to receiving this grant, the WCFN was focused solely on helping our small post-industrial

city of Windham, Connecticut (CT). Our work has been centered around redistributing resources already existing in our community. We embraced this ethos long before the term "circular economy" entered the food system zeitgeist, and not just because it aligns with our mission of building a just, equitable, and sustainable food system but also out of necessity.

The WCFN facilitates a variety of food systems projects, and managing these relationships is at the heart of this work. The WCFN was launched in 2015 through an initiative to broadly survey local food system partners as well as a "dialogue-to-action" process that was facilitated by Everyday Democracy and Grow Windham. This process engaged diverse community members and food system partners in a series of community dialogues and an "action forum." Our projects and priorities emerged out of this process and therefore have the mandate of our constituents as well as represent the leveraging of local resources to meet local food system needs and opportunities. For the first few years our organization was organized into working groups around different aspects of our food system. See Figure 1.

However, we found that members were not connected and little action was being taken beyond discussing these issues. When I stepped into a leadership role in 2018, one of my first actions was to dissolve these siloed working groups. I felt it was a symptom of a larger trend I was seeing in food system work. Organizations were not communicating, and as a result they were wasting valuable time and resources duplicating programs instead of working together.

We shifted to a project-based perspective, which not only engaged more community members around tangible projects but also fostered collaboration between entities and community members to achieve our goals of redistributing resources. We still touch each aspect of this original food system diagram, but we have blurred the lines in making sure they all feed into each other. See Figure 2.

¹ <https://www.ams.usda.gov/selling-food-to-usda/farmers-to-families-food-box>

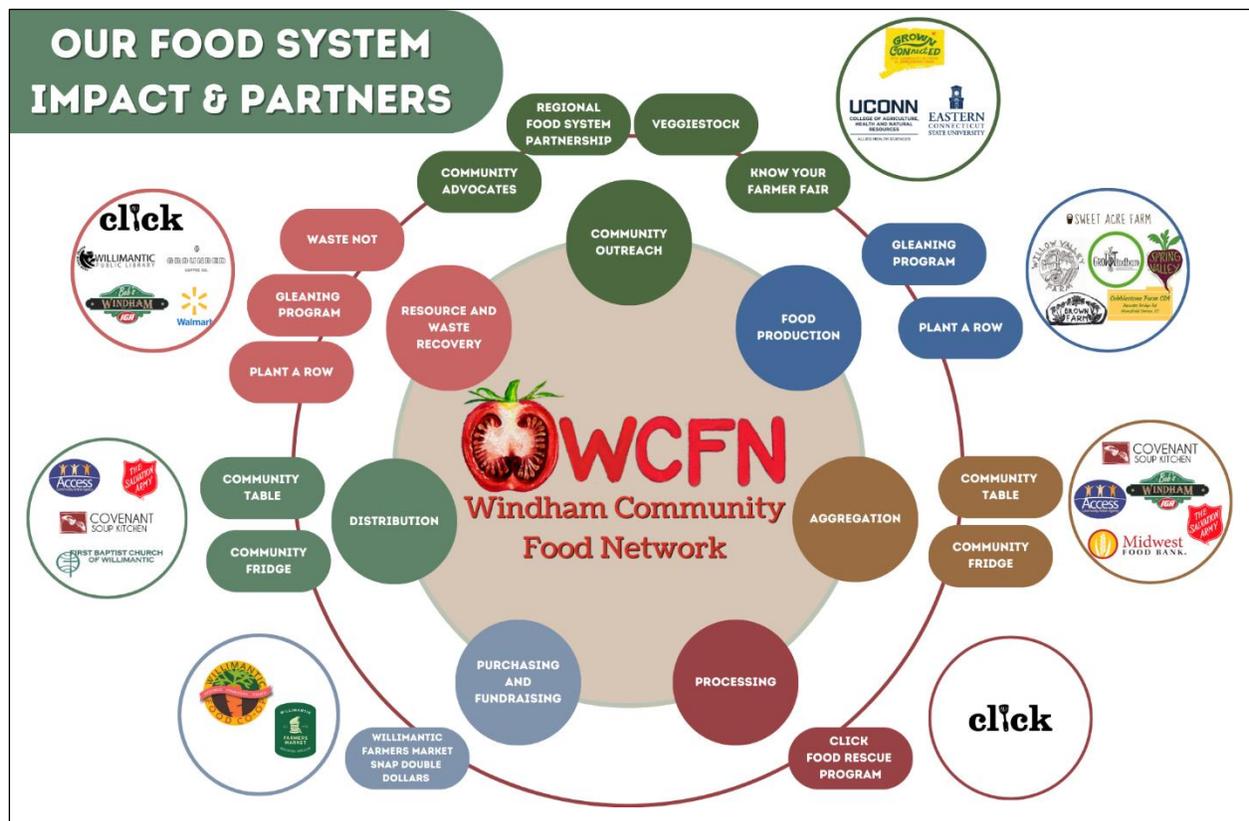
Figure 1. Windham Community Food Network Food System Working Groups



For example, the Community Table/ Mesa Comunitaria (CT/MC), a program of WCFN, is a constituent-led food pantry that increases access to nutritious food and community voice. Originally a response to COVID-19, the program has continued beyond its initial funding through crowdfunding, shareholder participation, and integration with other local food resources. Both the participation of its recipients and fundraising support demonstrate the community's commitment to the program to continue and evolve.

Through the CT/MC program, we deliver weekly boxes of food to 35 families, with an emphasis on reaching Latinx women, teens, and elderly in Willimantic. These boxes are filled with food gleaned from local farmers, gardeners, and pantries, and supplemented with items purchased through community fundraising

Figure 2. Windham Community Food Network Food System Working Group Projects and Partners



efforts. We provide stipends to recipients to enable them to play a role in administering the program.

The CT/MC, like all other WCFN programming, is committed to reducing waste and redistributing food resources (such as seeds, seedlings, and produce) that are already available in our community. We facilitate seed and plant distributions to community members with the help of “Plant-a-Row” donations from agricultural schools and farms. Community members can access a catalog of seeds year-round at our local library, and we distribute donated seedlings at our “Veggiestock” event, where local organizations also provide gardening support to the public. Any surplus food collected is brought to other pantries in town or to a cooperative licensed kitchen, where it is processed into shelf-stable items, limiting waste even further and extending the reach of our resources long past our limited growing season. We also operate a “Waste Not” composting program that collects food scraps at local events which is then made into compost and redistributed back to the community for free to use for community gardens and “Plant-a-Row” participants. Through shared values for sustainability, we have been able to be responsive to both constituent needs and environmental concerns in our community.

Lessons Learned

In 2021, I felt like we had figured out much of the puzzle of our local community and were excited to see how we could scale our work throughout the Eastern Connecticut region. While I am proud of all the work we accomplished during this time as a team, I feel the most valuable result of this project were the lessons I learned as an individual around what it takes to administer regional food system projects. I would like to share five of these key lessons so other organizations and researchers can learn from our Regional Food System Partnership journey.

1. Be intentional and relationship-oriented when building a structure.

In the nonprofit community, we talk at length about the need to break down silos. Silos lead to a duplication of work being done across communities that ultimately wastes valuable resources as organi-

zations reinvent the wheel instead of building on one another’s work. Our Regional Food System Partnership sought to break down these silos by gathering stakeholders to discuss our region’s work together. However, a partnership is only as representative as who shows up. With much of our work led by the WCFN, our partnership was overrepresented by stakeholders based in Windham.

In the beginning stages of our research, we had strong representation from the nearby community of New London, but their representatives’ engagement waned during year two, when operationalizing our work was becoming increasingly Windham-based. I cannot fault us for this, as it was the system we knew best, but we should have made a more concerted effort to have equal representation. We ran into a similar issue during our initial research phases with another city, Norwich. We had limited connections to the community, and as a result we were not nearly as effective in identifying challenges or opportunities for their communities.

If given the option to embark on this journey again, it would not be framed as a Windham-based project looking to scale up. Instead, it would be framed as multiple hubs, with dedicated staff in each hub, working on bridging the divides between our communities.

2. Think beyond the immediate scope of the issue.

To build on the need to bridge communities, I have seen firsthand that achieving what we think of as a “regional” food system is again not simply a matter of scale. There is no “one-size-fits-all” solution. During our research phases we were able to identify many of the same needs across towns, such as a desire for more culturally relevant crops or transportation for local food. However, when it came to operationalizing these opportunities into pilot projects, the similarities ended. In Windham, we have a high number of Latinx immigrants and the crops they were asking for reflected that, such as certain varieties of peppers and herbs. In New London, where there is a large Afro-Caribbean population, those communities were looking for different crops. This was contrasted even further in Mansfield, where we saw people asking for Asian varieties of vegetables and more halal items.

We ran into this same issue when we discussed

transportation. Residents in urban areas, where there is already access to public transportation, were seeking more local options downtown. Meanwhile, in the more rural communities we saw a demand for door-to-door delivery programs.

The socioeconomic, cultural, and political situations were so drastically different between communities that it became difficult to operationalize this information. Instead of building projects around these identified needs, we should have fallen back onto these geographical hubs and to build location-specific solutions that could address problems more effectively and holistically.

3. Begin with the limits of your data.

Knowing what is missing from your data is just as important as what your data contains. In our case, since the relationships with some communities were weak, we struggled in our wider community surveying efforts, resulting in a large portion of our community-based data coming from Windham and entirely missing voices of other communities, like those of Norwich. This provided us with ample opportunities to draw conclusions about Windham, but we were not able to extrapolate this across the region since each community varies so much.

Even in Windham, though, we were limited in the conclusions we could draw. Much of our food access surveying was done at food pantries in our community. While this is an important population to capture, these individuals have already found ways to access food. What about the individuals who have not found a way to utilize the existing pantries in our community? We were missing the voices of perhaps the most vulnerable in our population.

Our work was built and conducted in stages where we collected all the data, analyzed them, and then worked to operationalize the results. Instead of viewing our project as linear, however, we should have been building a more intentional cycle of data collection where we identified these missing voices in a preliminary analysis and sought them out through additional rounds of surveying and interviewing.

4. Your research is only as good as your question.

During our research we surveyed hundreds of

community members, asking them how much local food they consumed. Instead of getting a clear answer to this, we found a huge variation on how consumers defined local. Some considered food grown in their town local, some considered all New England to be local, while others considered shopping at the closest grocery store to be local, regardless of where the food was grown.

Moving forward, it is important to us to come up with a unified definition around this term and properly train surveyors to explain this to survey participants, giving us a much clearer understanding of the “local” issue. What may seem obvious, or even just familiar, to you as an organizer or researcher may not be shared in terms of its understanding by the community you are working with. Again, this is where having a cyclical, not linear, mode of data collection becomes important in your work. It provides you the space to revise your questions as you move forward.

5. Effective community and university partnerships are key.

In the Northeast, there are no shortages of universities, professors doing research, and students looking to volunteer. Windham is located within a 10-minute drive of two major Connecticut universities. With limited resources, nonprofits often feel dependent on these relationships to get their work done, with this project being no exception. However, during my tenure with the WCFN I have had to learn the most effective ways to navigate these relationships that benefit both the community and the university. Oftentimes our communities can feel like a petri dish, with research being conducted but little benefit of the results coming from it. Other times, students are just handed over with little to no supervision, ultimately creating more work for the nonprofits to minimize any harm they may cause due to lack of training. I have also seen students be used for their labor but not learn any valuable lessons for their time.

I have found the best partnerships are those that have active engagement from both the community and university. A discussion needs to be had between the organization and university supervisors with clear objectives laid out ahead of time: What are the goals the community is trying to

reach through this partnership? What are the university's research plans? What do they plan to do with these results? What are the students' learning objectives? Who will oversee what? If any of these questions cannot be clearly defined, I have learned it is best to walk away from the opportunity—something that is not easy to accept in a field where there is always a shortage of labor—but ultimately worth it in the long run.

Conclusion

I fully believe that embracing circular economies is the way forward for community food system development. Nonprofits have become adept at stretching and recycling resources to make the most out of what they have. However, these programs all exist in a state of fight or flight when it comes to funding their work. We are beholden to chasing grants and bending our mission to fit the goals of funders rather than those in our actual communities. In the case of our Regional Food System Partnership, we realized that we needed to focus more on networking locally based solutions than trying to build sweeping regional solutions. However, this was not a part of our grant narrative, and we were forced to continue down a path and timeline that no longer made the most sense. I am so proud of the work we did and the partnerships that we built, but six months after our project funding has ended, I can already see the impacts of our work starting to diminish. We have retreated to keeping our own programs alive now that our funding source is gone.

Instead, we need to be looking within our community for this funding. We need to be building diverse funding models that allow us the room to pivot. I believe the path to these models lies in how we are redistributing the other resources in our community such as food, compost, volunteers, and seeds.

We are currently operating in two different food systems: the “emergency food assistance” model and what I like to think of as the “foodie” model, where higher-earning residents are buying local food as a reflection of

their values related to their community and environment. I see a real opportunity to bridge these models and create one food system where everyone has a seat at the same table by implementing sliding-scale models in our local food system, where profits are used to subsidize purchases for low-income consumers. So much of the work in alternative food systems right now focuses on either the farmer or the low-income consumer instead of looking at the “sweet spot” where these two issues intersect. See Figure 3.

Our Regional Food System Partnership sought to center this overlap, but after two years I see that the way to achieve this work cannot be done while being reliant on grant funding. It must be funded by the community. In hindsight, this should have been obvious all along: if a community does not support a project with its time, finances, and other resources, maybe that project is not what the community needs. Community buy-in is the path for alternative food systems success—for both the consumer and the farmer.

While we did not succeed in building the regional food system of our dreams for Eastern Connecticut in two short years, I am extremely proud of all the relationships built and lessons learned throughout this process. I believe we have truly begun to lay the foundation to achieving our original goals and see this experience as one that any food system organizer can learn from in their own work.

Figure 3. Windham Community Food Network's Regional Food System Partnership “Sweet Spot”

