

VALUE CHAIN COORDINATION COLUMN

**Adaptive by design: Flexibility and resilience
in regional food systems**VALUE CHAIN
COORDINATIONAnaya L. Hall^{a*}

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Practitioners working in regional food systems know that volatility is the norm, not the exception. Market shifts, climate disruption, changing priorities of buyers and public agencies, and turbulent funding landscapes are defining features of operating in this space. Responding to these perennial fluctuations requires flexibility and adaptability, which is exactly where value chain coordination (VCC) shines. Coincidentally, those same attributes make VCC efforts much more complex to measure and study than conventional supply chain interventions.

Building and maintaining a value chain requires a complex set of actors, resources, and physical infrastructure that is coordinated to move identity-

preserved food products from producers through intermediaries to final consumers. Appropriately sited and scaled built infrastructure (such as processing facilities, aggregation warehouses, and distribution trucks) is essential, but on its own is a blunt tool that is built for anticipated conditions and difficult to change. While physical infrastructure's costs and timelines are fixed and legible to funders, investment in VCC is harder to pin down, and yet its long-term market impacts can be significant and far-reaching.

While VCC professionals can and do support the development of hard infrastructure, much of their work focuses on the soft infrastructure of market matchmaking, providing technical assistance, and catalyzing new projects among aligned stakeholders (Rocker, 2019). The work encompasses many things, but at its core is fundamentally relational and place-based, contingent on deep knowledge of a particular regional market, its actors, and its rhythms. In contrast to the sweeping efficacy of infrastructure solutions, place-based knowledge enables VCC professionals to facilitate

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specific, focused interventions to existing supply chains or market dynamics for maximum benefit to suppliers and eaters.

This adaptive focus is not incidental; it is a core structural feature. Effective coordinators anticipate changing system conditions and respond accordingly, adapting in moments of disruption to support resilient and fair food chains. The COVID-19 pandemic offered a vivid illustration of this adaptive capacity in action: as restaurant markets and wholesale channels shut down, value chain coordinators redirected regional farm products into emergency food networks and direct-to-consumer channels. During that historic crisis, value chain coordinators from San Francisco to Kansas City were able to protect smallholder income streams while ensuring access to fresh foods by leveraging pre-existing relationships and place-based knowledge (Bomstein, 2021).

Yet coordination does not look the same everywhere; its expression depends on organizational context, funding structures, and regional market conditions. Coordinators may be housed in municipalities, nonprofits, food hubs, or Cooperative Extension services, or may operate as standalone consultants or enterprises. Funding and revenue models vary just as widely, contouring the specific objectives and guiding the day-to-day activities of the coordinators.

We suggest that across the variety of coordination models, what distinguishes VCC is that it is relationship-centered, adaptive, and calibrated to a particular place-based system. Whether working in an urban hospital's food-as-medicine initiative or as a rural extension specialist organizing a farm-to-food bank program, coordinators actively cultivate relationships, resources, and community capital that empower food systems to react and adapt to changing economic, political, and environmental conditions.

Unfortunately, the same qualities that make VCC nimble and adaptive—namely its focus on gradually building the mutually respectful relation-

ships that undergird value chains and ensure that economic benefits are shared across supply chain participants—also make it difficult to measure. Conventional metrics, like sales volume, can capture monetary outputs, but systematically miss the relational labor and place-based knowledge that make coordination durable. Building long-term, trusted relationships, providing information and resources, and sharing risk across supply chains may not appear in a balance sheet, yet these are frequently the key mechanisms by which VCC engenders meaningful impacts in regional agri-food economies.

The field of VCC increasingly recognizes the importance of incorporating formal evaluation mechanisms as core components of proving market resilience and scaling regional agricultural networks. The Food Systems Leadership Network's 2023 VCC Evaluation Framework is one example, helping practitioners connect day-to-day coordination work with longer-term outcomes (Food Systems Leadership Network, 2023). Specific tools like outcome harvesting, ripple effect mapping, and social network analysis offer promising approaches for capturing the nonlinear impacts of VCC (Rocker, 2019; Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012). As participatory and systems-oriented approaches, they allow practitioners and academics to document complex market shifts, track the growth of trust-based relational infrastructure, and illustrate the interconnected economic ripples generated by VCC professionals.

Embedding measurement frameworks that are calibrated to the coordination model, the moment, and the stage of organizational development into VCC activities is critical for demonstrating impact and securing institutional funding. Right-sized evaluation frameworks allow VCC professionals and enterprises to capture incremental progress and build a cumulative evidence base for their own programs as well as for other practitioners, funders, and policymakers.

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Documenting small wins matters for the people inside this system, too. The work of transforming food systems can sometimes feel Sisyphean: slow, difficult, and resistant to the tidy timelines preferred by funders. Practitioners associated with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s Food LINC initiative (USDA, 2016), for instance, agreed that three years was a reasonable minimum before relational investment yields reportable changes in sales or market activity (Dunning, 2022). Celebrating achievements beyond traditional volume-based metrics can help coordinators sustain themselves through the long work of agri-food systems change. It is also how the field accumulates collective knowledge about what coordination makes possible.

The field has generated important knowledge about coordinating value chains, but we suspect there is more out there that has not been shared across communities of practice. Informal producer networks, for instance, have long been recognized as a source of flexibility and adaptation in responding to shifts in food markets (Diamond & Barnham, 2012), yet we lack systematic documentation of the time-tested coordination practices and programs that cultivate and sustain these networks. Practitioners, scholars, and policymakers enmeshed in the everyday work of coordination have amassed hard-won insights about what holds up across changing conditions: financing models that sustain the soft

infrastructure through turbulent funding cycles, governance structures that distribute roles across positions without losing coherence, and evaluation approaches tailored to what coordination work actually looks like.

This JAFSCD VCC Briefs series is an opportunity to get that knowledge into circulation. We invite submissions¹ featuring well documented good practices, and durable policies and programs across various regional contexts and organizational models, with a particular interest in how programs have been evaluated across stages of development. Honest accounts of initiatives that were restructured or discontinued are encouraged. In addition to our ongoing open call requesting submissions for VCC Briefs on a wide range of topics across the marketing domain of the food system, we have a special call focused on coordinating institutional procurement.

As scholars and practitioners of this field, we suggest that the flexibility and nimbleness of VCC is a critically important adaptive tool for building food chains that prioritize producer viability, environmental stewardship, and community economic development—particularly in moments of disruption. Food system transformation requires both blunt and precise instruments; that means hard infrastructure and soft. This series is committed to helping us understand and hone the latter.

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¹ Learn more about the JAFSCD VCC Editorial Circle and Briefs series at <https://www.foodsystemsjournal.org/index.php/fsj/VCCFC>

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