Best Practices of Various Funding Support for Sustainable Local Food Systems in Midwest Communities

Linda Naeve and Christa Hartsook
Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Program Specialists
Value Added Agriculture Program
August 2014

Around the country, farmers, entrepreneurs, parents, students, community organizers, and activists are developing unique programs to develop food systems that are economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable. Local food systems are incorporated into numerous community programs designed to reduce food insecurity, support small farmers and rural economies, encourage more healthful eating habits, educate youth, and foster closer connections between farmers and consumers. These programs are being funded through a number of innovative ways using public and private support. These programs and efforts are stimulated by government programs and policies, such as the “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” initiative, which supports the development of local and regional food systems. According to The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition’s Guide to USDA Funding for Local and Regional Food Systems (2010), successful local and regional food initiatives offer models that can be replicated and lead to large-scale systems change.

There are many local and national funding sources that have been utilized to develop community-based local food systems. The following list of “Best Practices” was developed from a North Central Regional Center for Rural Development Policy project that looked at how seven local food systems programs in the Midwest sought and utilized alternative funding to support their programs and projects. The case studies from this project can be found at: www.extension.iastate.edu/valueaddedag and www.agmrc.org.

Best Practices

1. The project or program must align clearly with mission and/or objectives of the funding agency or organization. Define the goals of your project or program and then seek a funding source that supports the type of program or activity that you are proposing.

2. Utilize an experience grant writer for large, competitive grants. Select someone with grant writing experience and success, whether it is a passionate volunteer or a paid professional grant-writer.
3. Don’t overlook USDA grants because they appear overwhelming and competitive. The 2014 Farm Bill has given USDA new tools, resources and authority to support the rural economy. In June, 2014, the USDA introduced a new federal initiative, Local Food, Local Places, which provides direct technical support to rural communities to help them build strong local food systems as part of their community’s economic action plans.

4. Small community grants and foundation grants can become a catalyst for more funding or continued support. Look “outside the box” for funding partners through national foundations and within your community. Local business, corporate sponsors, community organizations, and non-profits are often willing to invest in their community.

5. Don’t rely on just one grant for single time funding. Nearly all of the community local foods programs that were studied in this project sought multiple funding sources ranging from government, non-profit agencies and organizations to initiative and sustain their programs.

6. Use funding to hire a program manager. Many programs aren’t sustainable unless there is leadership and continuity within the program or project. Programs dissolve when they are coordinated by an agency staff member or volunteer who may change jobs or assignments, move or lose interest. Program/project managers need support from a stable, core team and structure for the group to thrive and avoid burnout.

7. Partnerships, diversification and an entrepreneurial business plan are essential to sustain the program/project. Begin a long-term project with the goal of sustaining the program beyond the term of the grant or funding support.

8. Success and sustainability of a project of any size requires a diverse group working to create a common vision. However, don’t let the central, decision-making group become too large so that little is accomplished.

9. When several communities are involved in a visionary project together, a trusting and inclusive atmosphere must be created at the beginning.

Small rural communities that are often in competition for resources can greatly benefit by working together. Discussions, plans, and budgets must be transparent among all key participants.

10. When in the planning stages for a community-based local food system program, begin by focusing on one event or activity and don’t let it become too large and miss the objective. One community project failed with its first attempt because the activity became too large to manage and support. The project had to be scaled back and then allowed to grow as more partners invested time and resources.

Resources


Slow Money. https://slowmoney.org/