

Can Philanthropy Help the Feds Bring Sustainable Food Systems to Scale?

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Farm-to-table is tough when you're talking about millions of tables. So it's good to see philanthropy playing an increasing role in creating sustainable food systems, and also to see how a new USDA program is enlisting a fleet of funders to scale up the local food movement.

There's high demand these days for fresh food with a low carbon footprint and a nearby farmer's name on the crate. According to the [USDA](#), the number of farmers markets has grown by 67 percent since 2008, and local and regional food has become a multibillion-dollar market. Considering growing city populations, struggling rural economies, and the high carbon footprint of industrial agriculture, the stakes are way higher than supplying urbanites with heirloom tomatoes. Bringing local food to scale is central to sustainability, equity, and public health.

The trouble is, while it might seem simple to just grow food nearby and sell it to locals, there are all kinds of challenges to creating a successful local food supply chain.

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Farming is not cheap or easy. Urban farming is an [insufficient](#) way to feed a population by a long shot. Many supply chains that connect rural farms to nearby cities have atrophied because of industrial agriculture. So cities need to reconnect with surrounding rural areas in a way that allows small farmers to make a good living and that meets the diverse needs of residents. If you've ever participated in a farm share program and dined on cabbage for days, you know how tricky that equation can be.

Philanthropy has tracked this movement, and sustainable agriculture and food systems have become one of the hottest topics in environmental giving in the past five years or so. The USDA under the Obama administration has also made local foods a priority, and this [new federal program](#) will match close to \$1 million in public funds with \$2 million in private funds so far to take on the issue in 10 cities.

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Called Food LINC, the USDA program is concerned mainly with building strong links between demand in urban areas and supply in nearby rural areas. With federal and philanthropic support, the 10 cities (full list [here](#)) each have a “value chain coordinator” to coordinate producers and buyers.

The USDA has funded local food projects since 2009 to the tune of \$1 billion, but this program is unique in its leveraging of private funds and its intention to create templates in these cities that can be reproduced around the country. Dedicated money from Surdna will fund communicating best practices.

In other words, it's about figuring out how to build functioning local systems that can scale around the country.

This tracks a number of trends happening in philanthropy, and the 15 funders involved are in it for a variety of reasons. For one, there's an overall interest in improving the world's food systems. That's a big priority for Food LINC participant [11th Hour Project](#), one of Eric Schmidt's philanthropies.

There's also a movement in philanthropy to return control of resources like energy, food and water back to communities, and otherwise fund equity in relation to local resources. National funder Surdna, for example, has made the intersection of infrastructure and justice a core of its sustainability program. North Carolina funder and participant Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation prioritizes community economic development and social justice, as well as the environment.

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Foundations are also playing a large role in how well their cities and surrounding regions function. A lot of the funders involved in this project focus on quality of life in their geographies, such as the One Foundation in Appalachia, Gates Family Foundation in Colorado, and Thornburg Foundation in New Mexico.

A big rationale for philanthropic engagement with this program is having local presence, just as much as local funds. A large federal agency like the USDA might not be the entity to develop such decentralized systems, but with the help of local NGOs and funders, it hopes to spark improvements that will take root and spread.