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## **Developing a community-based local food system in Will County, Illinois: insights from stakeholders' viewpoints**

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## **Developing a community-based local food system in Will County, Illinois: insights from stakeholders' viewpoints**

### **Abstract**

The interest in and enthusiasm for shifting food systems to community-based and local trajectories have increased exponentially over the past decade. Part of the appeal of community-based local food systems is their potential to secure access to healthy food for local communities, expand sustainable farming practices, promote local food economies, and advance environmental and food justice. Interactions and collaborations within the spectrum of the food system's stakeholders – from farmers to local officials and organizations to local businesses and residents – are the cornerstone for effective food systems tailored to their community's needs. An increasing number of food system studies have applied stakeholder assessment approaches to map out complex situations among multiple stakeholder groups with different values and viewpoints regarding food system change. However, despite being an essential and influential political unit to target, counties have received very little attention in food system studies, as researchers and practitioners often focus on the federal and state levels of intervention to design food policies.

By applying the Advocacy Coalition Framework and using a qualitative, semi-structured survey that engaged with a diverse set of stakeholders, this study examined the food system in Will County, Illinois (USA). The answers to the survey questions offered insights into three overlapping and divergent Will County stakeholders' viewpoints (Pragmatic, Environmental and Food Justice Advocate, and Visionary) with the intent to inform and enact food system transformation at the county level. The discussion within this paper focuses on coalition building and collaboration between formal and informal groups in order to empower local communities to develop a distinctive food system identity that promotes community support, collaborative networks, and food justice at the county level.

**Keywords:** Advocacy Coalition Framework, food justice, county food planning, stakeholders assessment, community building.

## **Introduction**

Driven by economic globalization and managed by highly concentrated corporations structurally and spatially, conventional food systems are increasingly criticized for their harmful environmental impact (Fan, 2021) and the economic and social problems they are creating in rural America (Cleveland et al., 2015). In this context, local food movements, networks, and enterprises are emerging as a "second generation" of food movements that promote reintegrating sustainable modes of production, securing communities' access to healthy food, and developing viable local food economies (Chojnacki & Creamer, 2019; W. Feenstra, 1997; Gupta et al., 2018; Low et al., 2015b; Sonnino et al., 2019). Across the United States, an increasing number of stakeholders (e.g., farmers, food security advocates, public health departments, planning departments, economic development officials, community groups, educators, local businesses, county managers, non-governmental associations, and schools) have developed a common language about agri-food issues and are working together to implement and develop local food systems geared towards their community's needs (Bloom et al., 2020; Cleveland et al., 2015; Low et al., 2015a; Soper, 2021).

Establishing an effective local and community-based food system does not depend solely on the availability of farmers who grow local produce to meet consumers' demands. Many rural and urban farmers believe that their contributions go beyond securing access to healthy food and encompass the much-needed community and economic development as well as ecological, environmental protection. Unfortunately, their call for support from local government and community-development corporations can go unheard (Kaufman, 2007). There are three reasons why most local policies are not oriented more explicitly towards community-based, local food systems. First, the conceptualization of a local food system consisting of complex chains of activities, from production to consumption (farm to table), including processing, retailing, food waste management, and other numerous food changes (Ericksen,

2008), is very complex in its scope, scale, stakeholders, and goals, and therefore, challenging to manage. Second, for local food systems to evolve and expand into community-based food systems, coalition networks and multi-stakeholder governance formed by concerted actions are crucial (Chojnacki & Creamer, 2019) but challenging to establish in a background full of ambiguity and differences. Finally, the tensions and conflicts, based on differences in scale, power, values, or conflicting value frames, still characterize the dominant industrialized agri-food system stakeholders, and continuously create a disconnect between community interests and local government policies.

Shifting conventional food systems – inherently global and connected by complex webs of information, goods, services, and capital – to local trajectories is mostly a challenge for governance (Garcia-Gonzalez & Eakin, 2019). As (Ostrom, 2011) puts it, governance can be defined by stakeholders (e.g., actors and organizations) who manage resources and establish clear guidelines and management rules before putting them into practice. Governance not only relies on institutions with their rules and standards but expands to include all the involved stakeholders, along with their values, actions, and viewpoints.

Many authors cite the usefulness of stakeholder assessments in mapping complex situations with multiple stakeholder groups to provide insights into the stakeholders' values and viewpoints (Campbell & Rampold, 2021; Garcia-Gonzalez & Eakin, 2019; L O'Brien et al., 2012; Saint Ville et al., 2017; Sanyé-Mengual et al., 2016; Van den Hove, 2006). This approach helps explain the responsibilities of organizations and individuals who play significant roles within the system (Reed et al., 2009). It also enhances participation and clarity in terms of visions and priorities and brings to light potential areas of conflict that may hinder policy implementation (Timotijevic et al., 2019). Furthermore, for many, a stakeholder assessment approach plays a significant role in encouraging food policy change (Aligica, 2006; Bryson,

2004; Saint Ville et al., 2017) and overcoming the obstacles faced by collaborative governance arrangements and local food networks (Benson et al., 2012).

As it may be observed in the United States, stakeholder assessments help frame winning coalitions that address local, regional, and state food systems priorities through structures, such as Food Policy Councils (FPCs). These councils reflect the significant role of partnerships and collaborations by backing initiatives for local food processes supported by grassroots efforts, commercial actors in the food chains, and local or state governments (Koski et al., 2016). A growing body of studies highlights the role of these councils in promoting many values related to local food systems, such as securing community access to nutritious food, promoting healthy eating, and preventing diet-related chronic diseases (Harper et al., 2009; Lange et al., 2020).

Despite the increasing use of stakeholder assessments in studies on the transition towards localism in food systems (Bassarab et al., 2019; Benson et al., 2012; Cumming et al., 2019; Freedgood et al., 2011; Garcia-Gonzalez & Eakin, 2019a; Gupta et al., 2018; Hammelman et al., 2020; Kaufman, 2007), there are few detailed studies on specific programs or policies developed at the county level (Low et al., 2015b; Walsh et al., 2015). This article aims to fill this gap by examining the perspectives and viewpoints of stakeholders about establishing a local food system in Will County (Illinois), which is located in the vicinity of the third-largest city in the United States, Chicago. Will County is a relevant choice for a case study because it faces several divergent food system challenges, such as rapid urbanization leading to the decline in farmland, an increase in residents' demand for local produce, and a pressing need to address food insecurity and disparities in food access.

This paper is a collaboration with Lewis University, which is located in Will County. It seeks to strengthen the research framework on stakeholder participation in establishing a sustainable, community-based local food system by engaging Will County stakeholders collaboratively. There were no established formal processes around these issues at the time this

research was performed. Still, a small group within the food system has emerged (e.g., environmental educators, activists, local farmers, and food banks managers) and sought support to change the current food policy and organization by engaging local communities.

This paper aims to identify which stakeholders are involved in Will County's food system and assess their engagement, opinions, and interests in promoting a shift to a more localized and community-based food system. To this end, we built upon Paul Sabatier's (1988) Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), an evidence-based framework focusing on stakeholders' values, beliefs, and positions to understand their viewpoints and involvement. The methodology is based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews aimed at understanding and deconstructing stakeholder viewpoints with regard to their positions and responsibilities in the current food system. This approach will identify who should participate in achieving Will County's food system transformation and informing collaborative actions among them. The discussion within this paper focuses on coalition building and collaboration between formal and informal groups to empower local communities to develop a distinctive identity for a community-based, local food system that promotes sustainability, viable local food economies, social equity, and food justice in Will County.

### **Conceptual framework: The Advocacy Coalition Framework**

A growing body of stakeholder assessment studies has used frameworks drawn from earlier works of policy scientists concerned with the distribution of power and the role of interest groups in the decision-making and policy processes (Colebatch et al., 2019; Ostrom, 2011). In particular, Paul Sabatier (1988) made an essential contribution through the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), which was initially developed to address "*wicked*" problems (e.g., economic, environmental, and political). These problems have the peculiarity of being the subject of substantial conflicts that require multiple actors from several levels of government

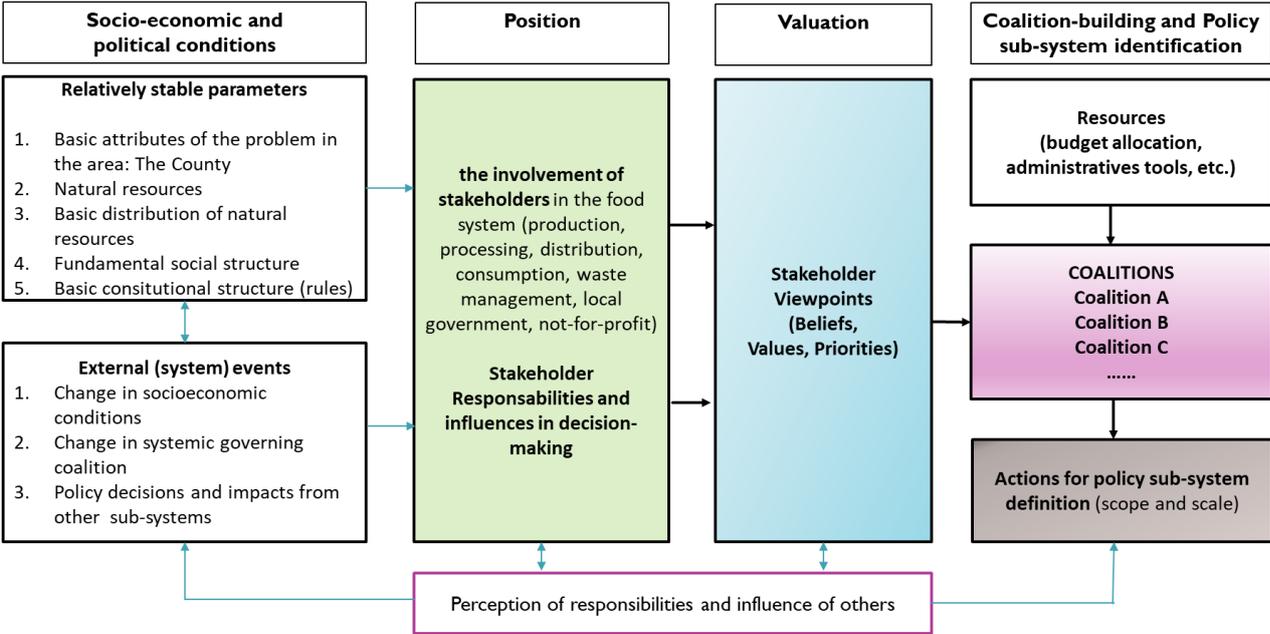
to change their mindsets and behaviors in order to find solutions (Pierce et al., 2017; Weible et al., 2011; Weible & Sabatier, 2009). The ACF posits that stakeholders form partnerships to influence policy processes through belief systems, which translate into values and viewpoints (Weible et al., 2011) that are, in turn, influenced by their positions and responsibilities (Pierce et al., 2017). Weible & Sabatier (2009) posit that although stakeholder viewpoints are affected by external factors, such as socioeconomic and political conditions (see Figure 1), possible coalitions among them will tend to evolve into an ongoing process of search and adaptation motivated by a desire to achieve policy goals. Hence, the framework tends to identify stakeholders who share a specific set of viewpoints guiding their actions (Colebatch et al., 2019) and are most likely to be key players in specific policy subsystems<sup>1</sup>. Environmental, energy, water, and food policies exemplify policy subsystems that include interactive networks of interest groups, beneficiaries and agencies involving many levels of government and non-government policy actors. By focusing on shared actions and institutional development, the ACF is useful to study stakeholder viewpoints towards developing local and community-based food systems, particularly when these systems emerge via grassroots initiatives that may have connections with the government, because it informs more coordinated actions (e.g., food policy coalitions) that support food system initiatives to address the connections between human and ecological systems, social justice, community health, and democracy enhancing initiatives. Garcia-Gonzalez & Eakin (2019b) emphasized the usefulness of the ACF framework in allowing stakeholders to reflect on their interests and capacities within the food system, before planning any efforts to build consensus and take collective actions in the Phoenix Metropolitan area food system. Moreover, Clark (2018) provides evidence about the relevance of the ACF by showing how a civically oriented group in Franklin County, Ohio, transitioned

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<sup>1</sup> These actors may include those from the private sector, non-profits, academia, consulting firms, the news media, engaged citizens, and possibly others (Weible & Sabatier, 2009)

into an advocacy coalition that shaped the county’s Local Food Council’s mission, objectives, and political tasks, which resulted in a food policy agenda.

**Figure 1-** An adaptation of the diagram of the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Weible & Sabatier, 2009) and (Garnett, 2014)



**Method**

*Survey design*

The ACF was used as a theoretical framework in the questionnaire's design to understand stakeholder viewpoints comprehensively. Hence, the questionnaire asked stakeholders: (a) how do they define a community-based food system, (b) what roadblocks do they perceive in the current food system, (c) what are the essential values, in their opinion, of the current food system that need to be sustained, and (d) what are the critical first steps and actions to transition towards a community-based, local food system in Will County.

The questions were followed by a mapping exercise consisting of open-ended questions about stakeholder perspectives on the essential steps to achieving a community-based, local

food system. Stakeholders were asked to share their opinions on the required changes in organizational conditions to build coalitions that would coordinate interests not yet present in food policymaking at the county level. Participants answered questions such as, "*According to you, who are the key decision-makers primarily responsible for enacting change in the food system of Will County?*" and "*In your option, who are the most important, or the key organizations to maintain a community-based local food system in Will County?*" Additional conversations beyond the survey questions also informed the analysis and reporting within this study.

### ***Stakeholders' selection and recruitment***

The stakeholders recruited for this study were selected based on theoretical considerations that are grounded in the policy sciences (Maxwell & Slater, 2003; Pelletier et al., 1999) and studies published on community development (Bolles, 2019; Cumming et al., 2019; Kaufman, 2007; Mendes et al., 2011; Thilmany McFadden et al., 2016). While the former emphasizes the need to give equal attention to the process as the product of any political change resulting from coalition-building between stakeholders, the latter attempt to analyze the food system stakeholders at a granular level beyond the binary vision of categorizing them as (a) those controlled by the globalized industrial food systems or (b) those embodying the sustainable, alternative, and local food system. Overall, examining the effect of stakeholders' values, responsibilities, and sources of power related to food planning and policy formation is what these works have in common. The Will County Regional Sustainability Network, the Will County Habitat for Humanity, and the Will County Land Use Department<sup>2</sup> offered their assistance to identify 42 stakeholders actively operating within the food system with as many

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<sup>2</sup> Specific actors within the same stakeholders' group (e.g., Government offices) were identified as potentially having opposite perceptions. For instance, different offices can support or hinder the transition towards a local food system within agricultural service providers: natural resource conservation service *versus* farm service agency.

varied positions and responsibilities as possible. Not only did this provide a diverse sample, but it overcame some barriers to entry that can threaten qualitative research. In addition, a supplementary list, which was generated from internet research, included other actors who were deemed critical players in the process of community-based, local food system planning and policy decision-making in Will County (e.g., state health department, food banks, not-for-profit organizations, researchers, community gardens leaders etc.).

All the survey participants were categorized into groups based on their positions and areas of intervention within the food system (see Table 1). Participants were contacted by email or phone, informed of the survey's purpose, and invited to participate. In the end, 33 face-to-face interviews of stakeholders were conducted from the summer of 2018 through the summer of 2019 due to time constraints and resource limitations<sup>2</sup>.

**Table 1 – Activities and Responsibilities of Survey Participants**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Academics/ Researchers	3
Health department representative	2
Community building	3
Production/local farmers	6
Distribution	2
Processing	1
Waste management specialist	1
Food services - retailers	2
Non-governmental organizations	3
Food Bank	1
Local administration representatives	3
Policy development specialists	3
Land conservation specialist	1
Economic development specialist	1
Farm Bureau representative	1
Total	33

## Data analysis

The answers to the questionnaire were coded according to recurring themes emerging from the data (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Through content analysis (Lune & Berg, 2017), a codebook of themes and subthemes was created based on the questions from the questionnaire. The 33 completed questionnaires revealed themes and statements related to five main dimensions of a community-based, local food system, as discussed in the literature: (a) social justice, (b) environmental sustainability, (c) economic viability, (d) food supply healthiness, and (e) collaborative actions and networks. These dimensions reflect values that stakeholders routinely hold and typically correlate with their positions and responsibilities in the food system.

The stakeholder viewpoints were sorted into three main categories: (a) the **Pragmatic** viewpoint, which values the contributions of local food activities to Will County residents and focuses on the economic activities that the local food system must include (e.g., local food hubs, viable wages for food workers) and the requirements of adjusting existing regulatory instruments; (b) the **Environmental and Food Justice Advocate** viewpoint, which is concerned both with achieving environmental sustainability and improving fresh food availability, accessibility and affordability in local communities (e.g., alleviate the food insecurity and food access disparities spreading throughout the county), and (c) the **Visionary** viewpoint, which is not only concerned about environmental, social and economic contributions of the local food system to Will County's local communities, but strongly emphasizes the role of partnership and cooperation among stakeholders and local communities as an engine to foster food system transformation.

## Results

This section includes a narrative description of stakeholder viewpoints that was revealed by the data analysis. Figure 2 offers a visual representation of stakeholders categorized according to their positions and responsibilities in the food system and in relation to the three viewpoints. We share additional information to show how stakeholders align their values and viewpoints with the purpose of a community-based, local food system in Will County. In what follows, first, we review stakeholder definitions of a community-based local food system. Then, we share the perceived obstacles and the central values that must be maintained in the current food system. Finally, we highlight comments related to the first actions to implement and which stakeholders to engage collaboratively with to catalyze Will County's food system transformation into a community-based local food system.

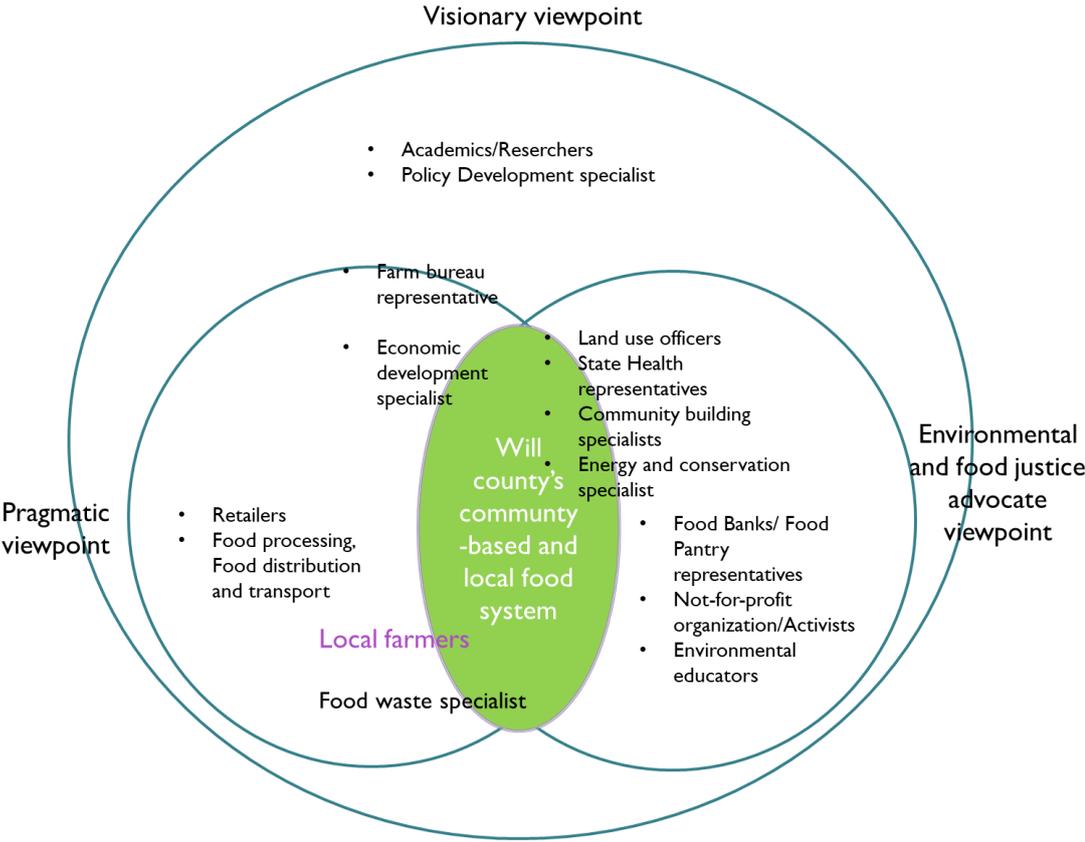


Figure 2. Stakeholders categorized according to their viewpoints

*Stakeholders' definition of a local community-based food system*

A community-based, local food system concept had different meanings according to the respondents' positions and responsibilities. First, respondents with a pragmatic viewpoint (n=12, including local farmers, food distributors, processors and retailers, and a waste management specialist), frequently defined this system in terms of economic activities by listing the spectrum of the food supply chain activities. Very few, expressed concerns about the environment or referred to the local food system's potential to achieve social justice goals as part of its definition.

*"A local food system is a group of tasks or actions that involve producing, moving, purchasing, and discarding food. It includes farmers, transportation, stores, farmers' markets, consumers, composting, and waste disposal." (Waste management specialist)*

Second, stakeholders with an environmental and food justice advocate viewpoint (n= 7, including activists, environmental educators, community-building specialists, and food bank managers) tended to characterize a community-based local food system mainly through its contribution to securing healthy and fresh food access for all. Activists underscored equity and justice in their definitions and called attention to the numerous ways in which socioeconomically disadvantaged groups are affected throughout Will County. According to these respondents, a community-based local food system will primarily help overcome poverty and racial disparities in the county and solve many inequalities throughout the food system.

*"A local food system promotes food as an individual and community right"*  
*(Activist)*

Finally, in many ways, the idea of regional food systems correlates with community-based, local food systems for respondents with a visionary viewpoint. Most of the respondents in this group (n =15, including academics, policy development officers, land use officers, health

officers, a land conservation specialist, researchers, an economic development specialist, and community building specialists) stressed the importance of networks and fostering collaboration between formal and informal groups to empower local communities within Will County. Thus, the food system is expected to play a prominent role in developing a county's distinctive identity that promotes sustainability, healthy eating, viable economic activities, and social and food justice.

*"A community-based local food system is a desirable, functional, and progressive process that would develop distinctive food identities for local places" (Academic)*

Other characteristics, such as, edible landscapes, comprehensive planning strategies, creating space for alternative agriculture (e.g., organic agriculture, regenerative agriculture, and urban agriculture), securing wages for food workers, and reducing food miles, were frequently underscored in the visionaries' definitions of a community-based food system (see Figure 3).

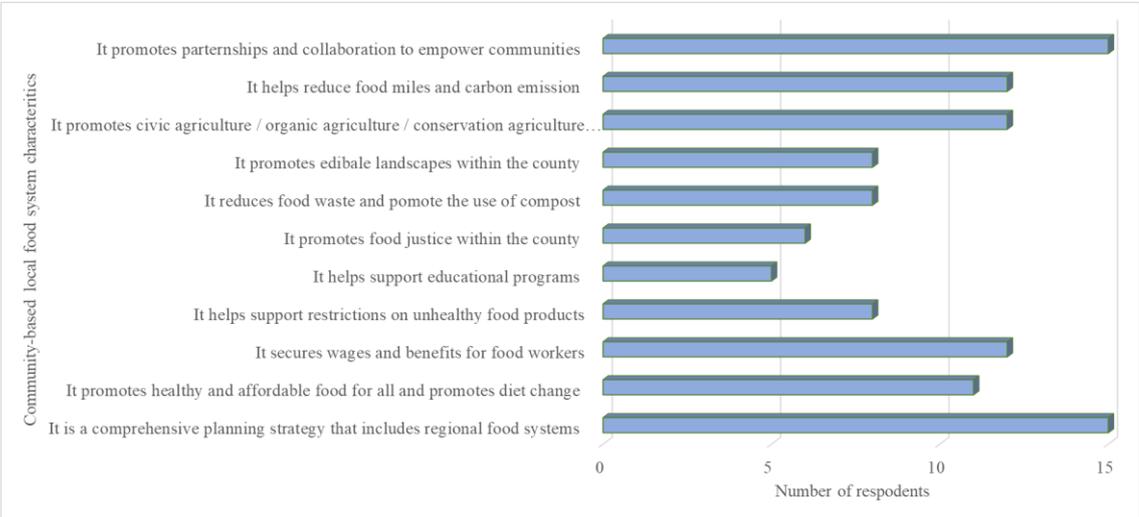


Figure 3. Community-based, local food system characteristics according to visionary stakeholders

*Perceived roadblocks to achieving a community-based local food system in Will County*

It is not only the definition of a food system that matters but also how potential actors perceive the obstacles to overcome in order to enact a change. Prominent in the stakeholders' discourse (19 out of 33) was a shared concern about the impact of the industrialized history of agriculture in Illinois. As most people in the United States, Will County residents obtain food from the mainstream food system (e.g., supermarkets, grocery stores, and restaurants), which typically source their food from centralized and global distributors who buy from large-scale producers. This has resulted in production-oriented landscapes neglecting the cultural and ecological functions that supported the agricultural activities for a long time leading to persistent environmental pollution issues. Overcoming a long history of industrialized farming practices is a must for Will County to build a sustainable community-based, local food system.

*"Farmers are encouraged to specialize, not to diversify, which has led to the loss of the ecological diversity of farms and soil degradation." (Community building specialist).*

*"Land use policy and the overall agricultural policy in Illinois favor large producers and processors promoting an export-oriented agri-food system." (Local farmer).*

Other structural roadblocks emerged from conversations with small-scale local farmers (n=6) who declared struggling to make a living in the conventional market. According to these farmers, scale issues, limited production capacities, profitability, and competitiveness of small-scale farms, and decreasing farmland acres in Will County were critical to address.

*"We are facing the dilemma of providing the right quantity and quality of products, and at the same time, maintaining decent living and wages, how could we match supply with large-scale demand?" (Local farmer)*

Local farmers also commented on the lack of knowledge required for direct marketing, which includes sales directly to consumers through farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), and intermediated marketing channels, such as sales to groceries, restaurants, and food hubs. Overall, they considered that "long-term viability hubs" have received very little attention from public policy.

*"In Will County, direct marketing approaches suffer from a lack of capacity both in terms of the volume of available products but also the required infrastructure to meet the growing demand for local and sustainable food. The most important obstacle to the local food system is the lack of economic, administrative, and physical arrangements of the most suitable scale for relocating locally grown food to local eaters." (Local farmer)*

Another area of concern, according to local farmers, is the inflexibility of the safety regulations. Indeed, the Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) profoundly impede the development of local food production and add further restrictions for food growers in terms of possible pathways to consumers in a way that traps them in a "vicious" cycle (Figure 4).

*" We can apply for certifications to access new markets, but the process can be expensive and time-consuming." (Local farmer)*

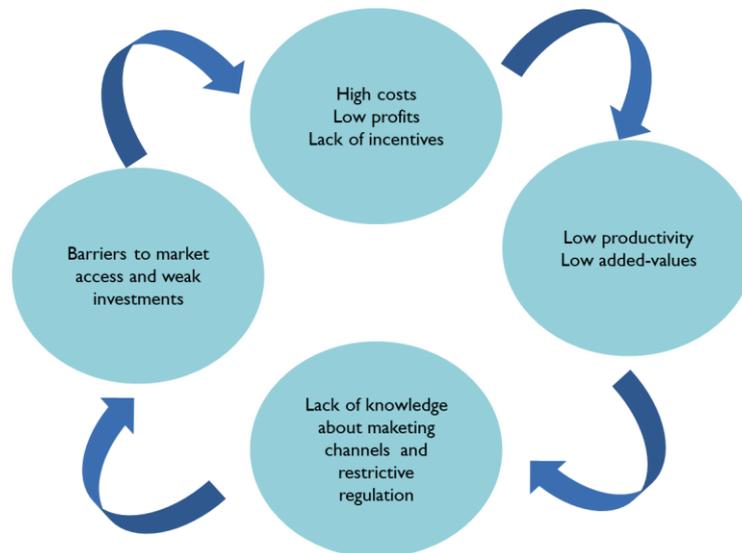


Figure 4. The "vicious" cycle of Will County's local farmers

Urban agriculture emerged as a shared area of concern between stakeholders with an environmental and food justice advocate viewpoint (mainly activists, community-building specialists, environmental educators, and food bank managers) and those with a visionary viewpoint (land-use officials, energy, and land conservation specialists). Both acknowledge urban agriculture as part of the solution to the frequent shortages of fresh fruits and vegetables in Will County. These shortages are caused and even exacerbated by the geographic position of the county near Chicago, one of the largest cities in the U.S., and Naperville, one of the Midwest's wealthiest cities. Indeed, most of the fresh food produced in the county is transported to be sold in these cities. Although interstate highways contribute to manufacturing and distribution costs in the domestic market, they serve as essential socioeconomic boundaries in Will County.

*"Will County is set up preferably to meet the demand of two large markets for locally grown food, Chicago and Naperville. Eastern Will County, where currently a large percentage of farms is located, has access to I-55. Western-Southern Will County has access to I-80" (Land use officer)*

Will County is ill-equipped to integrate urban farming into its plans, and these activities are still to date overlooked. Land-use regulation and urban planning sought to separate incompatible land use in Will County, proactively eliminating the nuisances or negative externalities of agriculture from residential land to protect the population's health and safety. Unfortunately, this accentuated the lack of secure tenure for urban growers and hindered urban agriculture development on a larger scale.

*"To date, the current land use policy tended to bypass or even ignore food that is grown within the county's boundaries." Community-building specialist*

*"Current land management authority has limited ordinances regarding growing the food outside of agriculturally zoned areas and did not anticipate how food access can impact on local economies as well as on the residents' health." (Health department representative)*

The opposition of urban planners to integrating urban farming further limits farmland availability, as food production functions compete with other more lucrative projects that provide higher profits for landowners, such as commercial development.

*"It is crucial to bring practical solutions to the land use issues that are imposed or perpetuated by the urban planning policy context" (Land use officer)*

Finally, visionary stakeholders have pointed to the absence of collaborative spaces to deal with food issues and emphasized the pressing need to creating a collaborative supply chain to market local food. The lack of inter-county partnerships was also evoked as an obstacle to overcome by a land-use representative, a health department representative, and an economic development specialist. Despite several initiatives towards building local food systems conducted in nearby Cook County, there are no established or emerging initiatives for

cooperation between the stakeholders in both counties and local communities to foster local food system advancement in the area to date.

*"The food issue is such a compartmented issue while none of this should exist.*

*Counties should find a way to work together." (Economic Development Specialist)*

*"In other counties, individuals representing diverse sectors of the food system such as education, conventional and sustainable agriculture, health department, political and legal system representative are all together already at the table.»*

*(Land use representative)*

### ***Critical values of the current food system in Will County***

Even if the challenge of achieving a community-based food system in Will County may seem daunting, stakeholders acknowledged some current food system values that must be sustained and even strengthened. Pragmatic stakeholders (e.g., local farmers, food retailers, processors, and transporters) underscored the rising awareness of community-supported agriculture (CSAs) initiatives as options for accessing short supply chains. Furthermore, retailers and food transporters highlighted the current food system's capacity to provide year-round access to fresh vegetables and fruits and seasonal local produce as essential value to maintain.

Values expressed by environmental and food justice advocate stakeholders join those voiced by visionary stakeholders. Both pointed to the overall historical culture of farming in the United States as an essential value to sustain while widely expanding sustainable farming practices. Moreover, the growing enthusiasm for local food movements, and the connections created by the county's dynamic farmers' market, are also perceived as crucial in linking consumers and producers through business and social relationships in Will County.

*"America is the land of opportunities and abundance with many food outlets, and business is delivering food via internet shopping." (Health department representative)*

*"We are an agriculture-based country; we can keep the tradition of farming alive but go back to our roots versus big agriculture." (Activist)*

Visionary stakeholders demonstrated a robust agricultural consciousness by acknowledging the significance of farmers in the local economy and communities. They perceived the farmland assessment in Illinois and lower-taxed farmland in Will County positively, in addition to being a value to sustain and an opportunity to seize.

*"Taxes are nice to pay for things like roads/bridges, needed government services, and employees' wages and benefits, but lower-taxed farmland makes Will County a unique place to live. We need to develop a sustainable local food system to help them understand why and how a local food system can and will be for the way for Will County to become a vibrant and diversified county instead of a county with more warehouses for Chinese product distribution."(economic development specialist).*

### ***First steps to initiate planning a community-based local food system in Will County***

Creating organizational and physical structures at appropriate scales for local aggregation and distribution of food emerged from visionary (e.g., a land-use specialist and an economic development specialist) and pragmatic (e.g., local farmers and retailers) stakeholder responses as an immediate action to overcome the roadblocks of pooling food products from many small farms and delivering them to grocery stores, restaurants, hospitals, and schools throughout the county. In addition, environmental and food justice advocate stakeholders reinforced this argument, as they stressed the importance of consolidating the local food

production-consumption nexus by rebuilding and expanding existing farmers' markets and developing viable markets in underserved neighborhoods. Mainly, activists and environmental educators advocated that the markets can tackle the food desert problem and empower people who live in those areas to create a more just place.

*"Many food deserts already exist in Will County; the primary challenge of the local food system is to feed those who are living in these areas." (Environmental educator)*

Responses reflected a consensus among environmental and food justice advocate and visionary stakeholders on two significant steps to start planning in Will County. First, both emphasized the need to focus efforts on developing urban agriculture initiatives throughout the county, apart from already existing school gardens. These initiatives are attuned to bringing a structural change in building community food resources and developing what they termed to be "*food citizens*." Thus, urban agriculture is not only understood as a mere way of growing vegetables, but it also has potential for citizenship, learning, creativity, community, and social responsibility. Second, both acknowledged the importance of shifting responsibilities to the regional level as a first step in planning a local food system. This would engage communities differently because the excitement and connections through community engagement in the food system have to spill over to the regional level. Will County has to articulate a clear role for itself to achieve local food system goals grounded in establishing strategic collaborative actions, promoting a combined agenda of food-access justice, and catalyzing sustainable agriculture.

Visionary stakeholders (a health department representative and a land-use officer) prioritized developing fruitful collaborations between not-for-profit and local government agencies, especially when such initiatives strengthened urban communities in other surrounding

counties like Cook County<sup>3</sup>. While local government agencies have responsibilities for nutrition, education, and school lunches programs, not-for-profit organizations, such as churches and food pantries, exemplify organizations that keep the emergency food network operating. Furthermore, most visionary stakeholders acknowledged the role of government support in creating new projects that link individual community members and businesses directly with local farmers to improve the local food economy. Others emphasized the necessity of addressing land availability, access, and usability by urban farmers. Finally, visionary and environmental and food justice advocate stakeholders, as well as local farmers, pointed to the importance of supporting the food system's social component through communication (e.g., campaigns to encourage the county's residents to buy local) and educational programs.

*"It is essential to educate the youth and strengthen their knowledge from where the food is coming from and the ways it affects their health." (community building specialist)*

***The most important organizations to involve in Will County community-based local food system***

At this stage, the questionnaire aimed to understand the complex problem of governance and policy food system change in Will County and identify the main actors who must be involved. Most respondents (n=18) underscored the significant influence of political and corporate actors in triggering a fundamental change, as financial interests and corporate power dominate the current food system. These respondents shared a common belief that national politics must support new dynamics that resist corporate food-system control.

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<sup>3</sup> Cook County is the most populous county in the United State of Illinois and the second-most-populous county in the United States after Los Angeles County, California. More than 40% of all residents of Illinois live in Cook County.

Although the Farm Bureau's historical role in promoting local farms and securing residents' access to safe and abundant fresh food was emphasized by a slim majority of pragmatic stakeholders (e.g., local farmers, retailers, food transport), Will County's residents were also cited as crucial players in the local food system for their role as consumers.

*"We hope that consumers can be empowered to create change." (Local Farmer)*

Even if local farmers and gardening groups remain the most visible part of the local food system, according to visionary and environmental and food justice advocate stakeholders, it is essential to find ways *"to bringing new farmers to the table."* Will County Land Use Department, Joliet Junior College Horticulture, Will County Health Department, Will County Board, and several Community Green Groups are actively engaging in spreading sustainability within the county. They were mentioned as being among the stakeholders to include in the *"incubator"* mechanism for Will County's community-based local food system (See Figure 5). Furthermore, not-for-profit organizations are perceived as growing forces within the county and, therefore, are expected to play a pivotal role in increasing democratic, participatory decision-making about food system issues and improving food justice. In particular, not-for-profits and local governmental agencies were stressed as an ideal and pathway to overcoming the differences in wealth, power, and privilege that have long shaped Illinois' food system. Respondents also advocated for engaging in enduring relationships with grassroots movements motivated by the faith in their capacity to influence Will County's future course positively. One interviewee explained that *"a more bottom-up process might even make urban agriculture project settings look different from what it has been planned initially. Not-for-profit are already key players in the county as they support low and moderate-income individuals to obtain opportunities to prepare themselves for self-sufficiency."* Not-for-profit organizations also work closely with the Northern Illinois Food Bank and many local food pantries, feeding programs, food producers and retailers, corporations, foundations, churches, and entities to accomplish

the goal of *"no individual to be hungry in Northern Illinois"* (Activist). Moreover, Will County Governmental Leagues (including thirty-three municipalities) were identified as partners to provide technical assistance and services and serve as a forum for cities to discuss mutual concerns and resolve community food issues.

*"Will County Center for Community Concerns and those in Will County Office of Education as well as the offices' holders of the surrounding towns and cities which support unincorporated communities have a role to play." (Community building specialist)*

Finally, municipalities are perceived to play a role in placing the food system on the urban agenda by increasing the amount of land available for urban agriculture and securing its access, developing meaningful ways to hear the three viewpoints expressed by stakeholders. Local farmers and activists, along with a land-use officer, associated municipalities with redesigning local food governance, by closely working with not-for-profit organizations and local communities, and emphasized their role in scaling up food systems and catalyzing innovation. It is worth noting that municipalities have influenced recent municipal policy changes and increased support for new urban agriculture projects, such as community gardens.

*"Food is not just an agricultural or another rural issue anymore, and municipalities must make it visible and connect it to other networks such as transportation, employment, housing, and economic development systems"*  
(Academics)

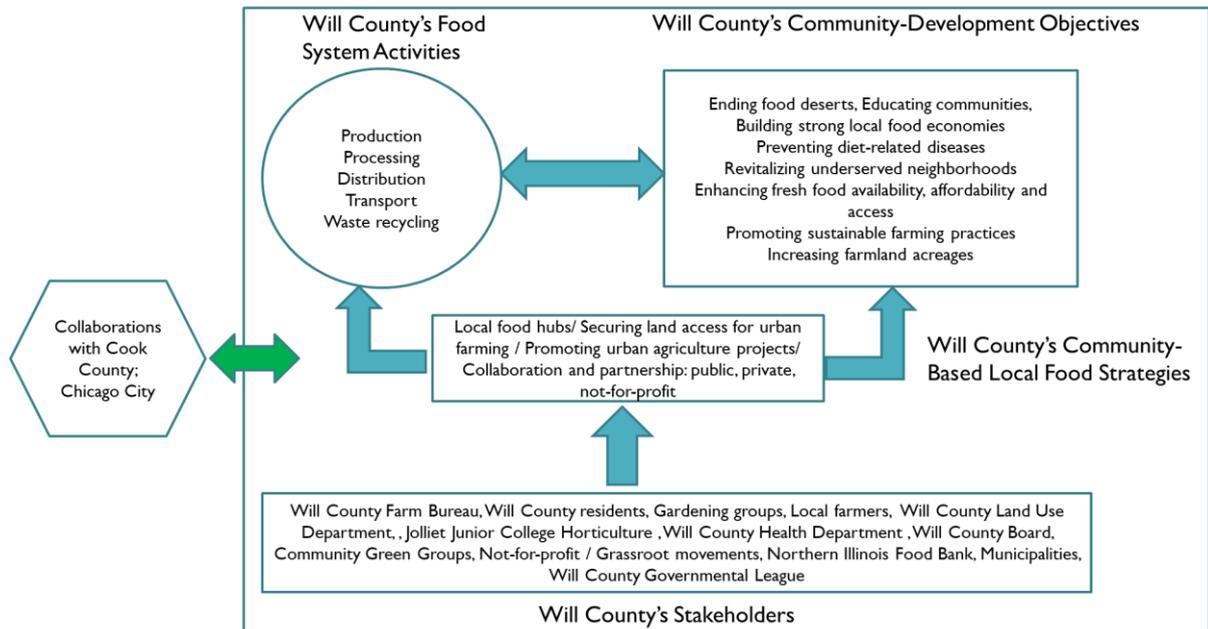


Figure 5. Will County's stakeholders and food system's community development objectives and strategies

## Discussion and concluding remarks

The premise of this paper is that the first step in transforming the food system at the county level is to understand dominant stakeholder values and viewpoints. Our findings indicate that Will County stakeholders hold diverse food system values and a diverse understanding of food system governance, according to the viewpoints expressed. Identifying and understanding these viewpoints inform coalition-building strategies to create spaces for collective actions supporting community-based, local food systems.

A food system's governance and policy span many areas and involves an interplay between different levels of the government that have varying degrees to which they can act. In the United States, food policy has primarily targeted the federal and state levels, which are the dominant divisions of power in determining who gets to control what<sup>4</sup>. Some progressive

<sup>4</sup>Federal government has authority over foods sold across state lines, state government can regulate food sold within states lines.

change has been established in coordinated food policymaking actions in several states through state food system assessments, state food plans or charters<sup>5</sup>, and state food policy councils. At the local level, food system initiatives in cities, such as Boston, Madison, New Haven, and Baltimore, demonstrate the local government's efforts to shift the food system towards localism and sustainability. Despite this, counties are still missing support to establish specific food policies and programs that focus on their community's needs. We should, however, be aware that counties have subdivisions, which may include townships, municipalities, and unincorporated areas. Therefore, counties differ in many ways from cities in scale, resources, the scope of services and programming, and governance.

In this study, Will County offered an opportunity to research the emergence of new levels of actions within food policy and governance geared towards the county level. The survey was a valuable tool in identifying key players who we would expect to form a core team and work collaboratively towards building local food capacities to engage Will County's communities in a meaningful way. However, this paper is by no means comprehensive in our discussion of all the ways in which stakeholders can work together in Will County.

### *Values and viewpoints to craft community-based food systems*

This study demonstrates the push and pulls that stakeholders face in expressing their viewpoints about community-based food systems while dealing with the constraints of their positions. According to their expressed values and interests, stakeholders were categorized into three main viewpoints: pragmatic, environmental and food justice advocate, and visionary. We do not suggest that all, or even most, stakeholders fit neatly into one of these viewpoints or endorse all the elements within the viewpoint. Instead, the viewpoints are ideal types, or constructs, that clarify converging and opposing positions in the stakeholders' discourse.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, since 2013, Minnesota Food Charter serves as a policy roadmap to provide Minnesotans with access to affordable, safe and healthy food regardless of where they live

Although these viewpoints may, at some point, diverge from the current food political process and current stakeholders' engagement in Will County, the narratives suggest that a community-based, local food system can bring many values, interests, and viewpoints into the conversation, creating a plurality conducive to collaborative actions involving stakeholders beyond the mainstream players in the food system.

The results indicate that the visionary viewpoint spans sustainability, food justice, value-added, and community building approaches of local food systems, overlapping with many of the values and interests expressed by pragmatic and environmental and food justice advocate viewpoints. Perhaps, according to visionary and pragmatic stakeholders, the most common area of concern is their claim to establish food hubs as a cornerstone for a long-lasting change in Will County's food system. Visionary stakeholders emphasize food hubs as spaces for creating collaborations to align with alternative food networks and social movements (Levkoe et al., 2018) and food democracy goals (Perrett & Jackson, 2015). Visionary stakeholders also see food hubs as a new organizational model aimed at achieving economies of scale (Blay-Palmer et al., 2013; Matson et al., 2013). By including social and environmental values (LeBlanc et al., 2014), visionary stakeholders exhibit a more comprehensive view of food hubs, which goes beyond the narrow focus on their market efficiency as expressed by pragmatic stakeholders. We argue that, for visionary stakeholders, food hubs express what is described in the literature as Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) (Matson et al., 2013; Matson & Thayer, 2013). In the United States, CBOs have made a long-term commitment to empower local producers by supporting and developing infrastructure that sustains market access and continuously ensuring a leading role for them in food justice movements (Porter, 2018).

The acknowledgments of urban agriculture's prominent role in building community capacities (Stofferahn, 2012), enhancing geographic access to healthy food, and achieving distributive food justice (Horst et al., 2017) are other areas of agreement between stakeholders

with environmental and food justice advocate and visionary viewpoints. For the former, these projects provide solutions for food availability and access issues faced by low-income communities, whereas, for the latter, they are opportunities for something more. Visionary stakeholders strongly emphasize urban agriculture as an economic value-added enabler. Many respondents to our survey reflected on the substantial support it has provided for creating alternative economic spaces, which reframed local economies by achieving alternatives to the mainstream food supply chain in the city of Chicago and Cook County. Attaining similar goals in Will County requires a specific model for entrepreneurial urban agriculture that would attract population groups, mainly those in underserved and low-income areas. This vision of urban agriculture resonates with "*the ripple effect*" or "*entrance economic development*" effect of entrepreneurial urban agriculture identified by (Fenestra et al.,1999). These effects translate into many benefits for local communities, such as retaining local control of new enterprises and activities, creating jobs, recirculating money in the local community, and making communities less dependent on external organizations and agencies.

Some of the visionary respondents underscored that urban agriculture is impacted by contradictory policy goals within the county (Land Use Department representative *versus* Conservation Specialist). In addition, Will County planning and zoning strategies are not adapted to integrate urban agriculture projects at a larger scale and need to be revised.

The effort towards establishing a community-based local food system in Will County requires a comprehensive treatment of the values and viewpoints expressed by stakeholders. To date, these efforts are incomplete, and no local governmental organization has strongly advocated better economic conditions for local farmers while advancing food justice.

Most participants in this study shared the criterion that the government does not – and should not – act alone in making decisions and setting the goals of a food system. While conventional and corporate agriculture can still dominate the food system, Will County’s local

groups (activists, not-for-profit, public health, environmental conservation, educators, etc.) are increasingly employing a variety of efforts to meet the needs of all community members and support food security (Kaiser et al., 2020). This corroborates research describing communities in terms of an effort to challenge agribusiness and corporate farming practices (Lobao & Stofferahn, 2008) and characterizing communities as diverse social groups who coalesce through a shared spatial consciousness and collective determination to protect lived environment (Haywood, 2014).

### *Coalition-building towards community-based local food system planning*

The Advocacy Coalition Framework applied in this study identified some degree of consensus around the need for a significant agri-food system policy and governance change. To achieve a community-based food system, critical areas were determined where coalitions need to be built or improved upon between formal and informal organizations, associations, and Will County residents. Stakeholders demonstrated a willingness and a strong commitment to translating their values and viewpoints into collective actions and policy solutions. These observations are, to some degree, consistent with previous agri-food stakeholder behavior analyses (Benson et al., 2012; Garcia-Gonzalez & Eakin, 2019b), as well as alternative and transformative food future studies (Balvanera et al., 2017; Sellberg et al., 2020). These studies stressed the importance of understanding the policy's local context complexity and accounting for the socioecological conditions in which food systems are embedded before transforming them.

The findings highlighted a consensus among stakeholders on the criterion that good food system governance and policy should be decentralized. It is, hence, fundamental for policymaking at the county level to address specific challenges and support the values of Will County's local communities. Visionary stakeholders, environmental and food justice advocate stakeholders, and local farmers see local progress on food system issues as possible and

incremental, without immediate changes on a larger scale. This implies that it is essential to food systems to allow local governments at the county level to create requirements and provide incentives or funding to support local food systems in order to deliver its inherent values even if the federal and state policies<sup>6</sup> would still serve as baselines.

Will County's food system illustrates the importance of the partnership between civic capital and local authority to advance a community-based food system and offers another opportunity to study food's convening power as a policy topic (Clark, 2018; Sambell et al., 2019). The results underscored the work stakeholders, who represent different power dynamics, need to accomplish across lines by cultivating relationships to achieve long-lasting and fruitful collaborations and partnerships.

In summer 2019, we presented the earliest responses from our questionnaire to the Will County Board and other stakeholders involved in the food system, including some of the respondents to our survey. Although, the presentation facilitated sharing the stakeholders' vision about Will County's local and community-based food system, many participants pointed out that enacting a profound transformation will require local government to see itself as an agent of radical social and political change, rather than constrained to land use regulation and program implementation at the county level. This is challenging because, despite the rising political discourse on food issues at the national level in the United States (Dephelps et al., 2019; Duncan Hilchey, Gilbert Gillespie, 2006; Gibbons et al., 2020; Low et al., 2015b; Martinez, 2016; Okrent et al., 2018), the ongoing food strategy processes at the county level have only recently entered the public debate.

Our results reinforced those obtained by Ingold et al. (2017) in their study of drivers that shape actors' agreement in nascent policy subsystems (i.e., issues that recently entered the

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<sup>6</sup> with their respective Department of Agriculture, Department of Public Health, Department of Education, Department of Human Services, and Department of Environmental Protection

political agenda). According to the authors, collaborations between actors in political decision-making processes is crucial from both an actor and a process perspective. Along the same line of thought, López & Christina (2021) stress that institutional, social, and resource collaboration are crucial to fostering food democracy at the niche level within the food system. Hence, relevant stakeholders in the food system need to be represented at the beginning of the dialogue in order to evolve into a coalition that is an empowering mechanism for groups or individuals, which is critical for local food system initiatives to function effectively.

As of this writing, the job loss and other economic crises associated with the coronavirus pandemic have increased the rate of food insecurity in Will County. In 2021, Will County stakeholders assembled and began coordinating a project to reduce household food insecurity and increase education of healthy food options. The project has the working title of “Food For All, For A Healthier Community” (Figure 6). Local government (e.g., Will County, Farm Bureau, Health Department), not-for-profits (United Way of Will County, We Will Grow, Partner In Hope, Holstein Capital Development, National Hook-Up of Black Women, Joliet), and higher education (Lewis University, Governors State University) are working collaboratively as a food team. This coalition set specific objectives for 2022 to establish a sustainable, community-based local food system in Will County. Examining the coalition members reveals that all three viewpoints identified by the authors using the Advocacy Coalition Framework are present. Not-for-profit organizations represent the Environmental and Food Justice Advocate. The Visionary is represented by both higher education institutions and local government, while the Pragmatic is represented by, once again, local government in addition to local food growers.



Figure 6. Food For All – Building a food community empowerment in Will County.

In our view, this is a positive step towards food system transformation in Will County and can lead to significant changes in the current socio-technical system. Indeed, following O'Brien and Sygna (2013), transformations towards sustainability do not involve only individuals (stakeholders' values and viewpoints). It also requires a change in two other spheres: (1) the practical sphere, including technologies and institutional changes, and (2) the political sphere (including systems and subsystems levels). This reinforces a point made earlier when introducing this study – coordinating thriving collaborative resources to set up a Food Policy Council that allows Will County to support its community food system initiatives. Observations from this study illustrate the change that can be achieved through cross-sector (not-for-profit, private, and public), civically oriented coalitions and their potential in providing fresh momentum for food policy change at the county level.

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