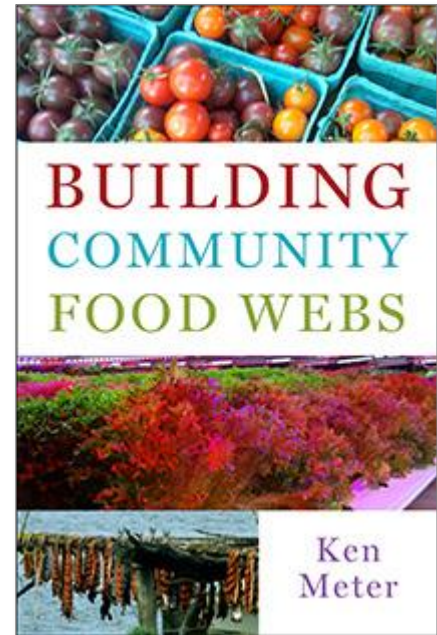


Relationship networks are the key to strong local food economies

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Review of *Building Community Food Webs*, by Ken Meter. (2021). Published by Island Press. Available as paperback and eBook; 304 pages. Publisher’s website, which includes a study guide: <https://islandpress.org/books/building-community-food-webs>



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Many readers of this journal are familiar with Ken Meter,¹ whose five decades of working with local community groups, state governments, and tribal nations in the United States to assess, plan, and build local and regional food systems have made him one of the most experienced people doing this kind of work. His pioneering economic analyses of local food systems and the

regional food system plans he has written can be found on the website of the Crossroads Resource Center. This much-awaited book is something different. It weaves together his years of experience in a collection of case studies that are grouped according to themes by chapter and which serve in this fashion to present some overarching lessons from Meter’s career.

Chapter 1 is a valuable stand-alone chapter that argues that “the prevailing food system systematically extracts wealth from rural and urban communities alike” (p. 3). In this chapter, which sets the stage for the rest of the book, he tells the story of how the number of farms in the U.S. has dwindled while the remaining farms have gotten larger and

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¹ Mr. Meter served as a JAFSCD columnist from 2010 to 2015. His columns can be found at <https://www.foodsystemsjournal.org/index.php/fsj/search/index?query=&authors=ken+meter>

switched from growing food for their communities to growing commodities for processing and export. In 15 charts, he shows us how net cash income for farmers has stagnated even as productivity has skyrocketed. Whereas at the beginning of the 20th century, farmers earned 40 cents for every dollar of food sold, today they earn 1 cent on every dollar. Graphs depicting the steep rise in production expenses demonstrate how the wealth created by farming goes not only to processors and distributors, but increasingly to providers of farm inputs. Meter also makes a valuable point about farm debt. He tells how many farmers in the early 20th century borrowed from other farmers, rather than from banks, and how most commercial lenders were based in the local community. This meant that interest payments at that time were reinvested in the local farming community, rather than being siphoned off to other parts of the economy elsewhere in the country. Rising production costs in the late 20th century—driven by inputs procured from distant sources—and the increasing role of outside lenders in local markets created massive outflows of wealth from rural communities.

Meter is clear that our current extractive system is a product of public policy and that we need new policy to reverse the situation. In the absence of such policy, however, community-level initiatives have become our best hope, and it is such initiatives that are the focus of chapters 2–10.

Chapter 2 tells the story of how a regional food system is being rebuilt in Montana, a state that has gone from producing 68% of its own food in the 1940s to less than 10% today. An expanding farmers' cooperative and a food enterprise center for processing local fruit and vegetable crops into higher-value products are but two examples of how Montana has been building a local food system via "a culture of cooperation." Chapters 3–5 also tell the stories of communities trying to cope with the consequences of export-oriented agriculture. Chapter 3 takes us to Hawaii, which was once self-sufficient in food production at a similar population level to its current one. Today, in the wake of plantation agriculture, the state relies heavily on imports and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP—formerly food stamps) benefits. Here, a public health official played an important


bridging role, connecting local farmers to the emergency food system via the creation of processing facilities. Chapter 5 takes us to Indiana, where commercial food processors were unwilling to buy from local farmers. These farmers formed a network and established a food hub in partnership with a local food bank that had recently invested in new processing facilities. In chapter 6, a food processing facility in Ohio serves a network of independent food businesses. In chapter 7, we see how rapid urban growth in Phoenix, Arizona, brought high land prices that made it hard for farmers to operate in proximity to a potentially lucrative market. Farmer isolation and lack of public support make this a negative case study that can be contrasted with chapters 8 and 9 (Colorado and Minnesota), in which local government support and public planning have contributed to the protection of farmland. Chapter 10 describes collaborative networks of farmers—in one case a vertically integrated network, including processing and marketing—that have built strong relationships with their customers.

Chapters 11 and 12 lead us toward the conclusion, explaining that it is not the food miles that are important when we talk about local food, but the relationships. The quick chapter summaries I present here of *what* has happened in various places risk missing the key point of *how* these things have happened—stories of relationship-building. Meter tells how "effective community food webs build market power for local farmers," giving them "stronger options than being price-takers in impersonal commodity markets" (p. 251). They do this by connecting farmers to communities of people—not only consumers, but also local charities and public officials—who care about supporting local agriculture. From a local development perspective, policymakers have reason to care not only about particular farms, but also about promoting a small-scale farm structure that will support a vibrant local economy and heightened civic engagement.

The work of Thomas Lyson, surprisingly, is not mentioned, but Meter's book is a perfect complement to *Civic Agriculture* (Lyson, 2004), and the two would pair well in the classroom. *Building Community Food Webs* shows us civic agriculture in practice, making clear the need for "civic" in two

senses: the need for effective local political engagement, and the need for farmers and their customers to build trust via dense networks of social engagement. Although many of the case studies involve the creation of local infrastructure, the repeated message is that building local food economies is not primarily an infrastructure project, but rather about building foundational relationships.

The book does not contain lessons on how to do the kind of economic analysis for which Meter is well known, nor does it present a recipe for building local food systems, but it is an excellent primer on how local food systems can stanch the

flow of wealth from rural communities and the importance of approaching these systems as social rather than logistical. Chapter 1, which explains the need for local food systems, is an excellent piece of work that deserves to be included on any food systems syllabus. Each of the chapters begins with a summary and ends with a paragraph linking it to the next chapter, making the text very easy for any audience to follow. I recommend this book for students, nonprofit staff, and public officials, as well as for anyone working on a USDA Regional Food System Partnerships grant application. 

Reference

Lyson, T. A. (2004). *Civic agriculture: Reconnecting farm, food, and community*. University Press of New England.