

Here's An Even Better Vision For Food Sustainability

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For those that are doing a HARD COPY, read, annotate, and answer the questions at the end of the article

What are the real barriers to increasing local food production, self-sufficiency and agricultural vitality?

By [Noa Kekuewa Lincoln](#) / February 12, 2020

Reading time: 6 minutes

The Jan. 30 Community Voice titled [“We Need A Better Vision For Food Sustainability”](#) raised important points about incongruencies in the government’s vision for increasing the market share of local food.

Ultimately what I took away from the article is that: 1) “local food” does not necessarily mean locals benefit, and 2) small farms are, for the most part, what we’ve got in Hawaii.

As highlighted, the governor’s State of the State address emphasized large-scale, private capital backed agricultural projects. In short, projects that would require no state support in order to reach the goal of doubling local food production.

Perhaps more importantly, efforts mentioned by the governor like Mahi Pono and Sensei Farms are large enough that, presumably, they will handle all aspects of the food chain. Not only will they grow and harvest the food, but also chill, process, market, and distribute that food as a necessary path to market.

When we talk about doubling local food production, the emphasis is always on just that — production. For some reason there is a notion that if someone would just grow the food then everything else will fall into place. And so, the emphasis is always on the barriers to production — access to land, water, labor and capital.



However, we ignore the fact that producing food is only the first step in a chain of activities needed to get that food to consumers. Not all foods are created equal in this sense; many need to be temperature controlled, further processed to some extent, packaged, and transported. And, perhaps most importantly of all, there is a huge amount of coordination

needed to find the market, negotiate contracts, balance supply and demand, and generally keep the producer, consumer, and middle men all happy in the process.

Does all of that fall on the farmer? It often does.

But can farms really do all of that alone?

For some larger ones, yes. And such farms tend to take one of two strategies. Either they focus on only a few crops so they can market them efficiently, or else they focus on a few clientele and grow everything those particular clients need.

For a small farm, these additional activities become impossibly restrictive. Not only is the infrastructure needed to conduct such activities often out of reach, the markets demand increasingly stringent food safety requirements, higher volumes and greater consistency than most can supply on their own. Not to mention all the time it takes to engage in these activities takes farmers away from, well, farming.

Given that Hawaii has over 7,000 small farms — 96% of the overall agriculture sector — this means that most of these farms struggle not necessarily with producing food, but with all the integral steps following production to actually sell their crops.

Success Stories

Food hubs are enterprises located near or in farming communities that facilitate the aggregation, storage, processing, distribution, or marketing of locally produced foods. Oftentimes such hubs also provide additional layers of quality control and technical support to the farms they work with. In short, food hubs take on many aspects of the food system value chain beyond the growing of the food.

Hawaii's first food hub, Adaptations, started 20 years ago in Kona by Maureen and Tane Datta. At that time, now prominent chefs such as Peter Merriman and Sam Choy were embarking on what would later be called Hawaii Regional Cuisine.

Adaptations offered these chefs a chance to offer unique Hawaiian cuisine by sourcing fresh and local ingredients from multiple small farmers. By representing multiple local growers, Adaptations was able to provide a steady supply of fresh, local food to hotels and restaurants in ways that one single small farmer could not.

Although Adaptations is a success story, farm hubs have been slow to catch on in Hawaii. A recent survey facilitated by the Hawaii Farmers Union United demonstrated that there are at least eight food hubs in Hawaii today, but most are less than five years old. Although young, they are growing fast and demonstrating a promising future.

The eight hubs surveyed represent over 650 small to medium sized farms and generate \$2.7 million in income annually by servicing over 200 restaurants and hotels, seven hospitals, all state Department of Education schools, and well over 1,000 individual families.

Food hubs can bring many benefits. Because they aggregate from multiple farms, they develop the volumes and consistency to attract larger clientele and are more efficient with marketing, distributing administrative costs across all the growers. For instance, the Hawaii 'Ulu Cooperative now provides breadfruit as a regular school lunch item to all DOE schools in the state, a feat that no one breadfruit producer in the state would have been able to do alone. This also allows hubs to justify investing in larger, more efficient infrastructure, secure commercial space such as state-owned facilities, and to attract grants and investment.

Another vital contribution of food hubs is the ability to capture and utilize food that would otherwise go to waste. At Kahumana Farm Hub in Waianae many members are backyard farmers or households with as little as a single fruit tree. Such growers now have a market outlet to offload and sell their fruit, which would have otherwise spoiled on the ground. Instead, Kahumana provides real income to local families, while increasing the availability of local fruit in markets.

A Way Forward

While the emphasis has too often been merely on producing food and, in particular, producing food on a large scale, we suggest that a better understanding of the local food system is essential for meaningfully increasing food production.

While there are major challenges to growing food in Hawaii, many farmers agree that there are even larger barriers around getting that food to market in a way that makes economic sense. Food hubs build their strength from having a large number of small producers and offer an inclusive platform for more of Hawaii's farmers to become part of a coordinated value chain. Together they offer powerful networks to improve our islands' food security, reduce reliance on imports, and provide steady supplies for farm-to-state sourcing of local food.

New bills are being evaluated by the Hawaii Legislature ([House Bill 1892](#) and [Senate Bill 2722](#)) that would create a pilot project for food hubs in each county. Please consider supporting these measures.



About the Author

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Questions

1. “The Jan. 30 Community Voice titled [“We Need A Better Vision For Food Sustainability”](#) raised important points about ***incongruencies*** in the government’s vision for increasing the market share of local food.”

Define ***incongruencies*** -

2. “However, we ignore the fact that producing food is only the first step in a chain of activities needed to get that food to consumers. Not all foods are created equal in this sense; many need to be temperature controlled, further processed to some extent, packaged, and transported. And, perhaps most importantly of all, there is a huge amount of coordination needed to find the market, negotiate contracts, balance supply and demand, and generally keep the producer, consumer, and middle men all happy in the process.”

Using this paragraph answer the following questions:

For farming, is there more to it than growing food?

Can all farmers, large and small scale, afford the additional steps that come after producing food?

3. “Food hubs are enterprises located near or in farming communities that facilitate the aggregation, storage, processing, distribution, or marketing of locally produced foods. Oftentimes such hubs also provide additional layers of quality control and technical support to the farms they work with. In short, food hubs take on many aspects of the food system value chain beyond the growing of the food.”

Using this paragraph answer the following questions:

What can help small farmers with their sales?

Define ***Food Hub***:

4. Could Ho’ola become a food hub for the academy? Why, why not? Answer in a SEEI format.