



Creating Circular Economic Opportunities through Localizing the Food Cooperative

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Local Food, Energy, and Alternative Economic Development

- Since the 1970s, a counter hegemonic movement against commodity/industrial agriculture
- Literature on the connection between food and community economic development
- A focus on reconnecting people with the food system (CSAs; Farmers Markets; Urban Agriculture; Food Hubs...)
- Issues: Periodic Access; Thus patrons are disproportionately White, liberal, middle to upper middle class



Models of Local Food Grocery Distribution

New initiatives have emerged to develop local food distribution

A major impediment for local food distribution has been volume and consistency that growers can provide to groceries

A proposed solution has been consignment model groceries that serve effectively as 7 day a week farmers markets



Co-op Principles

1. Voluntary and Open Membership
 2. Democratic Member Control
 3. Member Economic Participation
 4. Autonomy and Independence
 5. Education, Training and Information
 6. Cooperation among Cooperatives
 7. Concern for Community
- "The values of co-operative self-help and mutual aid are more relevant than ever for those who wish to see shared prosperity and the emergence of a sustainable economy."
 - Ed Mayo, Coops UK, quoted in Birch (2013)

Research Questions

- First, how can consumer food co-ops, an alternative model that has often prioritized access to high-quality foods for middle-class clientele, be transformed to a model that both supports local agrifood producers and local food access and security?
- Second, how can this model address the development of a regional circular economy that improves quality of life for local residents, especially in the context of a legacy city?
- Third, what are the opportunities and constraints of supporting local food systems and product economy through building a model that circulates financial capital?
- What are the assets that will make this model work?

Whole System Asset Framework for Neighborhood Development through Food



What are the Capitals?

Natural Capital

- The ecological resources that communities build on e.g. land, water, biodiversity, air
- Euro settler society sought to tame, constrain and extract natural capital – much work now is about rediscovering interconnections of natural capital

Built Capital

- Community physical infrastructure
- Human constructed infrastructure such as sewers, water systems, machinery, roads, electronic communication, buildings, and housing

Consumption		
<i>Access</i>	<i>Joint</i>	<i>Rival</i>
<i>Inclusive</i>	Collective	Common-pool
<i>Exclusive</i>	Toll	Private

What are the Capitals?

Financial Capital

- Includes forms of money used to increase capacity of the unit that accesses it.
- E.g. savings, debt capital, investment capital, tax revenue, tax abatement and grants.
- Other examples of financial capital: investments, fair wages, internal and external sources of income.

Political Capital

- Measure of social engagement: Who has opportunities for leadership and engagement and has a voice in public issues?
- Community ability to leverage resources of the political system through:
 - 1) Access to financial resources from the state (grants & loans)
 - 2) Regulations that enable the community to accomplish goals

What are the Capitals?

Human Capital

- Investments that add to the health, education, and well-being and self-esteem of people
- Often misinterpreted as educational attainment.
- Better understood as the skills, knowledge and abilities that can be developed and built upon to meet community goals and improve quality of life

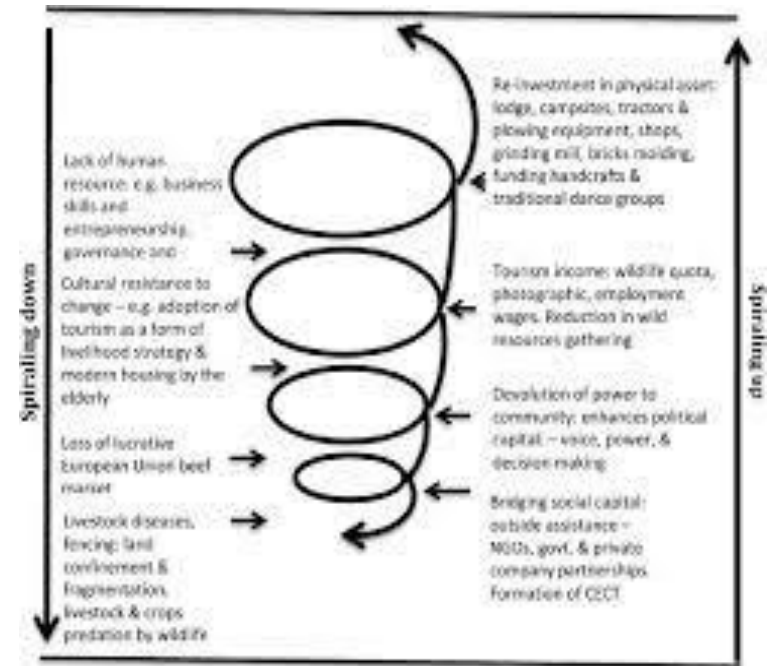
Cultural Capital

- The concept of culture provides a frame of reference for understanding the fabric of community life
- Connected by a common language, symbols, gestures, beliefs, values, and resources
- “tool kit of symbols, stories, rituals, even the world-view that shapes individuals” (Swidler,1986)

What are the Community Capitals?

Social Capital

- Represents the “glue” that holds a community together and whose presence can spur the type of economic growth that brings benefits to the entire community.
- Consists of “bonding” and “bridging” activities that occur within the local community setting, as well as “linkages” that tie community members to organizations and resources located outside the community (what is sometimes referred to as vertical connections).



Methods – Mobilizing the Capitals to Understand the Intersection Between Food and Development

Used a combination of:

- 1) participant observation at food distribution events
- 2) participant observation at meetings organizing the food system
- 3) interviews with key informants using a questionnaire that specifically drew out reflections on the capitals

Our questions asked key informants about

- 1) perceived impact of food development on the eastside
- 2) impact of food distribution capacity on the eastside
- 3) expected impact of the addition of the coop to the eastside

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The Lansing Eastside, ANC, and ELFCO

The Eastside:

- Between Downtown and East Lansing
- Diverse population of over 8,000 households

Allen Neighborhood Center (ANC)

- Place-based non-profit focused on providing programs and resources for Eastside residents concerning health & wellbeing, food access & security, neighborhood revitalization
- Farmer's Market, Veggie Box CSA, Breadbasket, Hunter Park GardenHouse, Incubator Kitchen

Eastside Lansing Food Co-op (ELFCO)

- Formerly East Lansing Food Co-op
- New location in Allen Place Complex
- Member-owned
- Goals: outlet for farmers, greater access to local produce and food products, providing a space for community



Findings: The Food System on the Eastside

- **Social Capital:** development of local food at ANC began with conversations in the community leading to recognition of food insecurity in the neighborhood
- **Human Capital:** development of local food was the result of proximity between emergency food distribution and local food distribution (CSA)

"The front half of the room, people come in and get their shitty sliced Wonder Bread and in the back half of the room, people were coming in [with] beautiful buckets of produce... people would come in to get their bread and be like, well, who's that for? And like, the unspoken answer was, well, that's for the people who can afford it. And... it made folks here realize... what the hell can we do?"

Findings: What is the Opportunity for a Consumer Cooperative?

- Opportunity to tie into existing Built Capital of ANC and the Eastside's local food infrastructure e.g. incubator kitchen, urban farms
- Walkability will create the opportunity for local circulation of resources



allenneighborhoodcenter More updates from next door at Eastside Lansing Food Co-op! 🍌🍌🍌🍌🍌🍌
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"ELFCO being in this community specifically is that although the walkability piece is great, there also is a big transportation issue. A lot of people on the Eastside don't have cars..."

Findings: What is the Opportunity for a Consumer Cooperative?

- Political & Financial Capital: government grants for the creation of local food and products initiatives
 - Subsidies are necessary given existing economic structures
 - Outside grants necessary to make alternative community organizations work—conventional system doesn't facilitate these efforts

“For projects like this, you need a big chunk of capital to start them. So, unless you have a private benefactor coming in to do all of this, which is problematic in its own different way, we need the resources from the federal government and the state government, and hopefully the local government and the support of all of those systems to work. Because at the end of the day, even if we're trying to build our own thing, we are operating in these systems that already exist.”

Findings: What is the Opportunity for a Consumer Cooperative to Build a Thriving Community

- **Cultural capital:** role of the co-op is to recenter community in the context of commerce, rather than center commerce as driving community
- **Social Capital:** success of the co-op will be in understanding and connecting to community needs

“Local food is kind of this trendy, Whole Foods kind of mentality: it's expensive, inaccessible. [Capitalism has] taken this thing that people want and turned it into something that's inaccessible because that's what markets do. But trying to give that back and hopefully reversing it a little bit, I think is the whole goal of ELFCO and co-ops generally. I'm really hoping that we can be a resource for people on the Eastside to shop and not have to feel like all of this is so out of reach.”

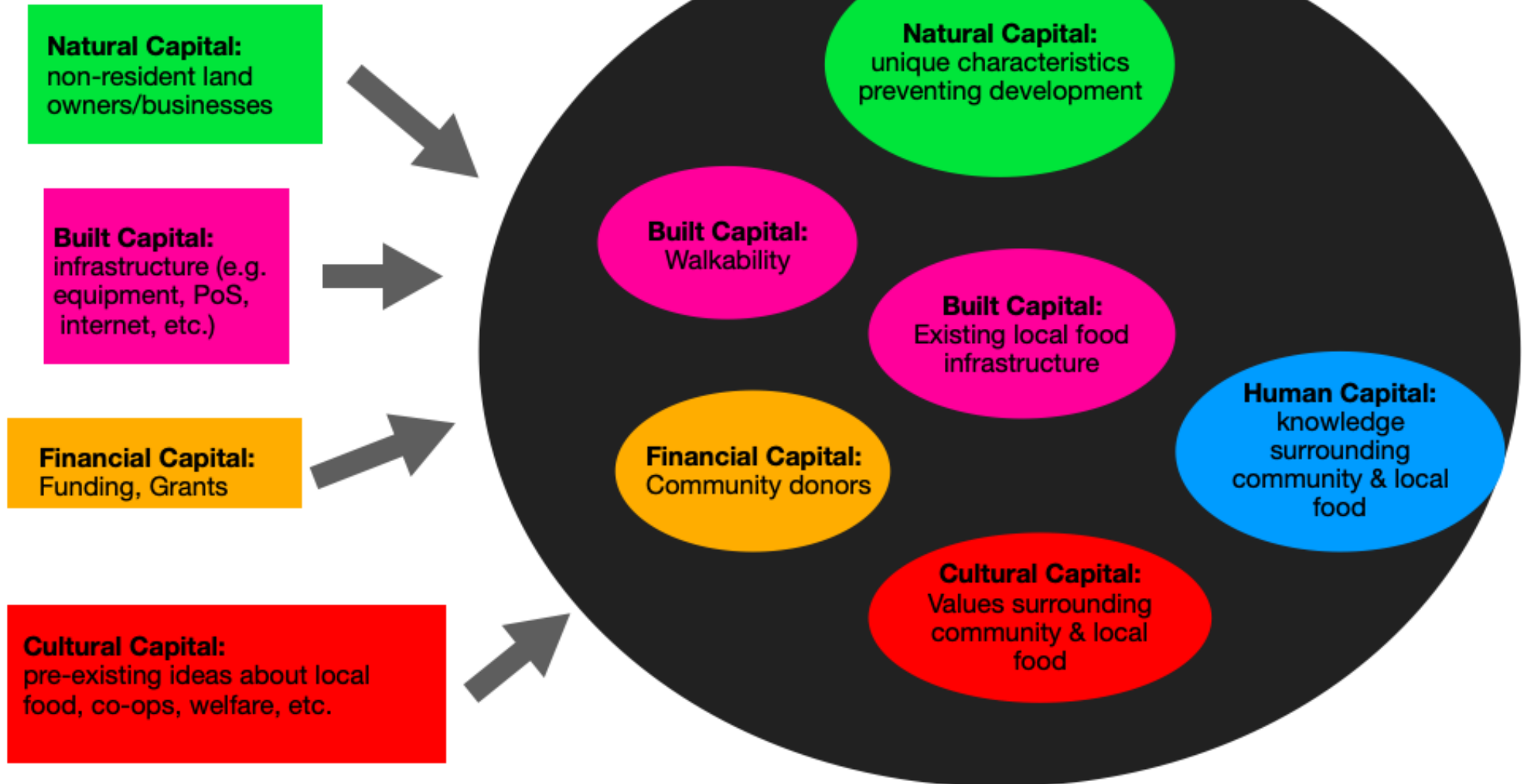
Findings: What is the Opportunity for a Consumer Cooperative to Build a Thriving Community

- **Social Capital:** challenge to connect regional and local food producers, while staying in communication with community members
- **Human Capital:** How to understand what Eastside residents need and want, and helping people to understand what is reasonable to expect at different times of the year

“And they have a place to sell their stuff and they're happy and they come in... not doing consignment and paying cash is incredibly positive. And if we try and be as fair as we can, if we have open buying times, people can bring this stuff in.”

Assets to regional circular economies

Outside inputs to regional circular economies



Conclusion

1. How can consumer food co-ops, an alternative model that has often prioritized access to high-quality foods for middle-class clientele, be transformed to a model that both supports local agrifood producers and local food access and security?

The importance of social capital: conversations with both producers and consumers

- Conversations with producers gave feedback about the co-op's planned consignment model
- Consumers and producers may want more than an avenue to buy/sell fruits and vegetables

Conclusion

1. How can consumer food co-ops, an alternative model that has often prioritized access to high-quality foods for middle-class clientele, be transformed to a model that both supports local agrifood producers and local food access and security?

- Need for neighborhood canvassing—communities change and conversations need to be iterative and continuous.

*People don't ask stakeholders anything and view stakeholders as just the people who have money. And time and time again in all different kinds of research, in all different kinds of nonprofit work, in all different kinds of whatever, that will completely change the direction of what's happening. So, as we're talking about food and food production and whatever I would just say a huge gap in everyone is just **asking**.*

Conclusions

2. How can the local food co-op model address the development of a regional circular economy that improves quality of life for local residents?

“Are we a community gathering place that happens to have food? Yes. Are we a place that supports prepared food makers? Yes. Are we in place to support local farmers? Yes. Are we a place that has food options for people who don't have much money? Yes. And so the challenge is going to be the mix all that”

- Continual emphasis on importance of values by key informants
- Food as being not just about food, but a way to provide connection to people, community, and ecology
- Tension: balancing community connection with basic needs and the consumerism connected with this.

Conclusions

3. What are the opportunities and constraints of supporting local food systems and product economy through building a model that circulates financial capital?

"I think success would be people actually living on the Eastside shopping there. I think that a lot of people will drive to ELFCO, people from East Lansing, and I think people outside of the community will shop there and that's great. We want everyone to. But I think success will look like when the actual community that lives there is utilizing it. I also think once the community sees it as a positive thing. That's what really matters."

Last Thoughts

Future research questions will include

- 1) how to assess the community interest in distribution of local food?
- 2) how have other coop like units impacted community development – and the role of local foods in community development?
- 3) could we map the investments and outcomes creating a model of ongoing assessment?

We would appreciate your thoughts and questions