

Farmers Market Organizations are More than Markets



Key Findings



- A farmers market is more than an event.
- Farmers market organizations manage farmers market operations, including day-of-market activities, but also have many other functions including risk management, partnership development and business operations.
- A farmers market organization may operate one market or multiple markets, and have different kinds of business structures. In addition, a farmers market may be managed by an umbrella organization for which the market itself is a program.
- Farmers market organizations are often supported by additional organizations at both the state and national levels. These groups have deep knowledge of how the sector works and the interlocking parts which comprise it.

Study Purpose

The goal of the “Analyzing the Diversity and Impacts of Farmers Markets Managed by Organizations” cooperative research agreement was to increase the general public’s understanding of the diverse forms that farmers markets in the United States take and the breadth of their activities. The project was conducted over two years (October 2022 to September 2024) and used mixed methods (an online environmental scan, listening sessions, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews) to explore the structures, activities, impacts and trends shaping farmers market organizations.

Farmers market organizations do more than run farmers markets.

Farmers markets take place in certain places during certain times, but these locations don’t show the full effort and influence of farmers market organizations. Farmers markets can sometimes be seen as special events, however, “anybody who’s thrown a party or planned a wedding knows how much work went into that in the background. And that is the organization” (Interview 71). Organizations take diverse roles, like:

- developing market mission, vision and strategy;
- creating and enacting partnerships outside of the market;
- undertaking advocacy with municipal leaders, public health agencies, other NGOs and market vendors;
- navigating the legal rules, physical infrastructures, and evolving technologies that allow markets to take place.

What is a Farmers Market Organization?

This project defined it as an entity that manages the operations and administration of one or more farmers market events on a recurring basis.



Non-profit Organization

Limited Liability Company (LLC)

Municipal Entity

Many kinds of organizations manage markets.

Market organizations vary in their organizational structure (e.g., a non-profit organization, LLC or municipal entity) as well as organizational type (e.g., an organization whose primary work is to manage multiple farmers markets as compared to a city government or university that runs the market as a program).

¹ The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service defines a farmers market as a recurring gathering of two or more farm vendors selling agricultural products directly to consumers at a common location.



Market typologies help make sense of the diverse farmers market sector

Given the diversity of the sector, various groups have created tools to identify types of farmers markets. Experts we interviewed suggested that a typology could help:

- 1 Organize understandings of diverse markets;
- 2 Provide a foundation for understanding the variables that contribute to differences in market focus, operations, organizations, and outcomes;
- 3 Allow individual markets to benchmark themselves against similar markets;
- 4 Capture the broad diversity of markets' goals.



Reviewing Three Typologies

Farmers Market Coalition Market Clusters

The researchers found that the most familiar existing market typology was the market clusters framework developed by Farmers Market Coalition.² In this typology, each market cluster has a different focus which manifests across all aspects of their operations. Focus is not determined by the business structure of the market: a non-profit corporation could run either a flagship market or an activator market. Across these market types, Farmers Market Coalition stresses that the mission, management, measurement and messaging all differ, though all markets make decisions across these four areas.

Project for Public Spaces Forms of Markets MARKET LADDER

Another typology is the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) Market Cities Program, which is developing a network of market operators across this evolutionary ladder so that they can learn from each other in order to advance "communities rooted in well-being and equitable opportunity" (PPS 2024). Within this framework, markets are seen as progressing from street vendors to tent markets to shed markets and potentially toward indoor public markets or market districts. This typology helps to fit farmers markets into a broader arena of markets, but is less useful for understanding the diversity of farmers markets and the organizations that run them.

Market Origin Stories' Impact on Market Organizations

Other participants organized their understanding of the sector by thinking about what era a farmers market originated within. This concept showed up in several interviews as participants reflected on changes in the focus of who was starting farmers markets over time, and to what end. One interviewee confidently identified five eras of farmers market origins: back-to-landers, neighborhood leaders, mainstreet markets, public health sector, and justice-movement markets.³

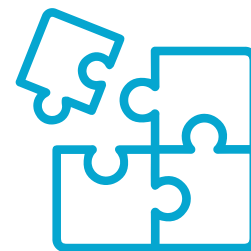
² Farmers Market Coalition. (2019). "Strengthening Pittsburgh's Farmers Markets." Retrieved from https://farmersmarketcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/gravity_forms/1-66fc51da018bd946fb1dfb74f4bea1e7/2019/03/Pittsburgh_FarmersMarkets_Jan2019FINAL.pdf. October 28, 2024.

³ At the time of writing this report, Darlene Wolnik at Farmers Market Coalition is working on a project to explore these eras by collecting origin stories of markets across the United States.



Challenges of Creating Market Typologies

Most participants were unfamiliar with these typologies, but many agreed a typology could be useful. Creating a typology will face challenges including:



- 1 Existing typologies do not speak to each other and are not widely shared;
- 2 The possibility of rigid typologies accidentally precluding emergent market activities. For example, current typologies do not account for markets that include online sales channels or CSA box programs. Any new typology should prioritize flexibility over rigid categories. A typology should not be used to categorize markets in ways that qualify or disqualify them for specific kinds of funding, for example.

Important Variables for a Typology ³

Table 2: Farmers market elements proposed for inclusion in future typologies

Typology Element	Potential Measures
Multi- or single-market organization	Number in network
Business structure	Legal designation
Market age	Year founded
Market size	Number of peak season vendors Number of off-season vendors
Organizational professionalization	Paid manager Year-round staff Succession plan
Market location	Rural/Urban Continuum Code Census Tract or County Demographics

Interview 35



“Not all markets are going to fit in only one type, or there might be a type that's missing... [a typology should not be] wielded as a weapon to put markets only in one category, or to force them into an existing category.”

Ideas for Future Research



Market typologies can be useful guides for market organizations and those that support them. An updated farmers market typology should be co-developed and ground truthed with sector stakeholders.

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³ Compiled from recommendations given in interviews and focus groups conducted for this project.

MAIN STREET REVIVALISTS (1990s - PRESENT)

MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS AND DOWNTOWN ASSOCIATIONS HAVE STARTED MARKETS AS INCUBATORS FOR SMALL BUSINESSES. MARKETS IN THIS CLUSTER ARE OFTEN PLACED ON MAIN STREETS TO ACTIVATE DOWNTOWNS BY SPURRING FOOT TRAFFIC AND BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS WITH OTHER LOCAL BUSINESSES. THESE KINDS OF MARKETS MAY ALSO PUT ON LOCAL EVENTS LIKE CONCERTS OR FAIRS, AND MAY BE OPEN TO A WIDE VARIETY OF VENDOR TYPES.

FARMERS MARKET HISTORIES

PUBLIC MARKETS SELLING FOOD HAVE LONG BEEN INTEGRAL TO U.S. FOOD SYSTEMS. THE NUMBER OF FARMERS MARKETS GREW FROM 340 IN 1970 TO ALMOST 9,000 IN 2019. THE FARMER-TO-CONSUMER DIRECT MARKETING ACT OF 1976, OR PUBLIC LAW 94-463, HELPED SPUR FARMERS MARKET EXPANSION. SINCE THEN, DIVERSE GROUPS HAVE USED FARMERS MARKETS TO REALIZE MANY GOALS. EXPLORE THIS IMAGE TO IDENTIFY MARKET ORIGIN CLUSTERS THAT EMERGED OVER TIME. THE ORIGIN CLUSTER MAY SHAPE WHAT THE MARKET FOCUSES ON MOST TODAY.

PUBLIC HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS (2000s - PRESENT)

FARMERS MARKETS HAVE BEEN IMPORTANT PARTNERS FOR THE FOOD-AS-MEDICINE MOVEMENT. PUBLIC HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS OFTEN PARTNER WITH HOSPITALS, CLINICS & COMMUNITY GARDENS TO FOSTER HEALTHY EATING THROUGH FARMERS MARKETS. THESE MARKETS MAY PUT LESS STRESS ON "LOCAL" FOOD BUT SEE MARKETS AS FAMILIAR SPACES TO ENCOURAGE HEALTHY EATING & EXPAND FOOD ACCESS.

ORIGINS OF THE MODERN U.S. FARMERS MARKET

WHEN AND BY WHOM A MARKET WAS FOUNDED SHAPES THE LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM. THIS IMAGE IDENTIFIES MARKET ORIGIN CLUSTERS AND THE ERAS IN WHICH THEY EMERGED. DOES YOUR MARKET FIT INTO ONE OR MORE? EXPLORE THE IMAGE AND SEE!

BACK-TO-THE-LAND MOVEMENT (1960s - 1980s)

EARLY FARMERS MARKET LEADERS CELEBRATED BACK-TO-THE-LAND MOVEMENTS AND CIVIL RIGHTS EFFORTS. MANY WERE ORGANIZED BY FARMERS THEMSELVES, AND OFTEN SPROUTED IN UNIVERSITY TOWNS. THE MARKETS SOMETIMES OVERLAPPED WITH BROADER COUNTER-CULTURE EFFORTS, INCLUDING COLLABORATING WITH LOCAL COOPERATIVES AND FOSTERING LOCAL AGRICULTURAL ECONOMIES. THE FOCUS WAS ON FARMERS GROWING WHAT THEY SOLD AND SELLING DIRECTLY TO CONSUMERS.

A SINGLE MARKET MAY INCLUDE PEOPLE WHOSE GOALS AND ASPIRATIONS EMERGE FROM SEVERAL OF THESE ORIGIN CLUSTERS. CELEBRATING THE VARIOUS HISTORY OF MODERN U.S. FARMERS MARKETS CAN HELP US SEE THE MANY IMPACTS THAT FARMERS MARKETS HAVE.

What will the future be?

LET'S DO IT! AND ALSO LEARN FROM HISTORY. OUR LEGACY IS RICH!

I HAVE SO MANY IDEAS TO MAKE OUR MARKET MORE JUSTICE-CENTERED!

NEIGHBORHOOD LEADERS (1990s - PRESENT)

SINCE THE 1990S, MANY NEIGHBORHOOD CIVIC LEADERS HAVE USED FARMERS MARKETS AS MECHANISMS TO BUILD COMMUNITY, PROVIDING GATHERING SPACES TO SERVE AS INFORMAL TOWN SQUARES. MANY FOUNDERS OF THESE MARKETS ARE NOT FARMERS THEMSELVES. THESE MARKETS OFTEN PROMOTE COMMUNITY EVENTS AND EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES, MAKING THEM INTO PLACES FOR PEOPLE TO GATHER AS WELL AS SHOP FOR FOOD.

JUSTICE MARKETS (2010s - PRESENT)

SOME FARMERS MARKET FOUNDERS INCREASINGLY CELEBRATE FARMERS MARKETS' LONG DIVERSE HISTORIES, HIGHLIGHTING THEM AS MULTICULTURAL SPACES THROUGH WHICH TO CREATE SYSTEMS CHANGE & COMBAT VARIOUS FORMS OF OPPRESSION. IN THESE MARKETS, THERE IS OFTEN A FOCUS ON BRINGING FARMERS BACK INTO DECISION-MAKING & PROACTIVELY CENTERING BIPOC PRODUCERS & CUSTOMERS.

خوش آمدید
BIENVENIDO
WELCOME
欢迎

DRAWN BY NAFISA FERDOUS

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