

Building Organization Capacity Supports Farmers Market Sector Development



Key Findings

- Sector and multi-market organization leaders see a desire to “professionalize”¹ the sector, understood as maturing and formalizing the operations of market organizations and expanding opportunities for market manager capacity building.
- Focusing on organizational development is seen as a pathway to help the sector increase its impact, including by securing more financial resources, through grant funding, sponsorships and earned income, and increasing support for and knowledge of the work of farmers market operators.
- High quality, comparable data about farmers market organizations can help guide sector priorities. Collecting such data across vastly diverse organizations is challenging.
- Partnerships between USDA and sector leaders to generate rigorous data at market, organization, state, and national levels can better document sector accomplishments, challenges and trends.

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 with sector leaders, for example, state and national organization directors) to explore the structures, activities, impacts and trends shaping farmers market organizations.

Sector Leaders Recommend Market Organization Capacity Building

A major theme in many interviews was the “professionalization” of farmers market organizations. Generally, “professionalization” refers to creating systems to help market organizations sustain themselves over time. One market organization leader summed up this need by stating that “non-profit is a tax status, not a business model.” Sector leaders shared examples of how internal capacity building strengthens market organizations.

The Farmers Market Legal Toolkit advises market operators on the responsibilities and expectations that exist between them and their host sites, vendors, customers and others. This tool helps market operators understand the social contract that they have to manage risk within their networks and provides concrete practices - like the creation of a legacy folder of important documents - that can support long-lasting, resilient farmers markets.

Building organizational capacity takes focused effort. For one state level farmers market organization leader, capacity building and the professionalization of market managers was paramount to the success of specific markets and the sector more broadly. For them, administering professional development for market managers is an important way to increase recognition of their varied skills, even when they are often underpaid or work as volunteers. Unpacking what she has seen in the last fifteen years of her career, she advocated for:

“Offering training programs and technical assistance for market managers, encouraging markets to have legacy binders where they’re recording institutional knowledge and sharing it with the next person that takes on that role have been really important activities for our state association to engage in to help market managers be successful. Advocating for equitable compensation for market managers has been extremely important. The turnover [of] market managers is extremely detrimental to markets... That will cause markets to close and it will cause markets to decline.” (Interview 35)



¹ The term “professionalization” was not universally accepted by all interviewees.

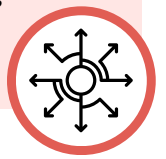


Training Strengthens Managers' Ability to Advocate for Markets and Themselves

Several states have implemented formal certificate programs and continuing education programs focused specifically on the skills building that managers need. The above state leader noted that certificate program graduates in her state have argued for higher compensation from their employers, built confidence in presenting information about their markets to funders and the public, and increased their skills in conflict resolution.

Building internal capacity can require shifting expectations about market management. One executive director of a multi-market organization explained how obtaining a new funding partner came with community expectations of rapidly expanded programming. However, they noted that building infrastructure for programs to grow well takes time. For them, capacity building meant:

"...pivoting, making sure that your operations are sustainable. When I took over, we [weren't] stable—we didn't have an office, we didn't have a way to centralize a lot of our record keeping, supplies, all of that—you need to build on that, you need a better foundation...But we had to grow internally. We had to hire staff, we had to get things stabilized...it took about a year for us to take a breath, stabilize, get hired, get people trained up. We went from having no classes a week to seven plus." (Interview 98)



These examples show how a focus on internal organizational capacity building can support a thriving farmers market sector.

Data Collection is Critical, and Tools Exist to Help Market Managers

The lack of data comparable across markets in the sector was bemoaned by interviewees, with one market organization leader insisting that "data is power." They argued that collecting the right data can support farmers market operators in making decisions about how to improve their organization and their markets, meet their goals, and aid in development efforts.

Existing Market Data Collection Guides:

- 1 MIFMA [Market Data Collection Toolkit](#)
- 2 [FMC](#) Farmers Market Metrics Tools
- 3 [Farm2Facts](#) Market Metrics Guide

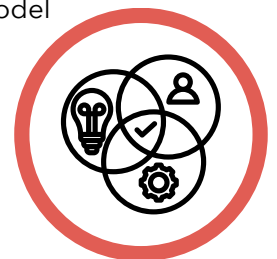
Capacity Building for Vendors, Not Only Market Staff

In addition to internally focused capacity building which supports the professionalization of workers at market organizations, our interviews also highlighted the importance some organizations put on capacity building work for their vendors. While our environmental scan data highlighted the fact that this makes up the minority of the programming of market organizations, this area has a large growth potential in the sector.

For example, one organization operating in the Southeast has developed a value-added product training program which gives producers selling at their markets access to an industrial kitchen which allows vendors to process and preserve items which they were unable to sell. This creates a new income stream for farmer-vendors and assists in skills building and business incubation.

The same organization also runs an online marketplace which extends the geographical reach of participating vendors by opening up sales channels to customers who do not physically come to market. Concurrently, it increases the hours vendors can sell, helping increase overall sales. This could serve as a model for other organizations.

In aggregate, project data illustrate the important work that market organizations do to engage, educate and support the public and the customers who come to the markets that they manage. Even as they provide education to others, project interviews highlighted the need for programming that focuses on farmers market organizations themselves. Such programs support vendors and market staff to grow more resilient farmers markets.



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