



Farmers Market Organizations are More than Markets

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1. Executive Summary

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.

This report presents project findings along five research themes:



Farmers market organizations are more than markets

Market organizations do much more than run markets on market day. Operating organizations have varied goals that impact how their markets work, what they aim to accomplish, and the ways that they are managed. Sector leaders have created several typologies to explore these differences. Stakeholders agreed that a widely-shared typology could be useful to market operators to communicate to stakeholders. While creating a typology was beyond the scope of this project, creating such a typology through a participatory process could be a fruitful area for future collaboration of USDA with farmers market sector leaders. Such a typology would need to be flexible to account for the diversity and rapid evolution of farmers market organizations.



Organizational diversity and funding strategies

There is high diversity of organizational forms within the market sector, with some markets operating as independent non-profits or businesses, others as programs of larger non-profit organizations, and many as municipal, healthcare or university programs. Different organizational structures can and do work for different types of markets - there is no one-size-fits-all. Some designations, such as 501(c)s, are more common than others. The structure and business designation of a market organization impacts how it can access funding and the types of activities that the staff must undertake. Individual market organizations often depend on a variety of funding strategies to stay afloat.



Market organization activities, services and programming

Market organizations provide diverse programs both at and outside of markets, including children’s activities, cooking demonstrations and nutrition classes, gardening and school-based partnerships. Much of the programming offered by market organizations is consumer facing, though a minority of market organizations tout vendor-oriented trainings and support. Nutrition incentive programs are particularly robust parts of many market organizations’ work. Markets emerge at the nexus of consumers and vendors. Accounting for their full food system impacts requires recognizing both the multidimensionality of their work and the inherent tensions therein.



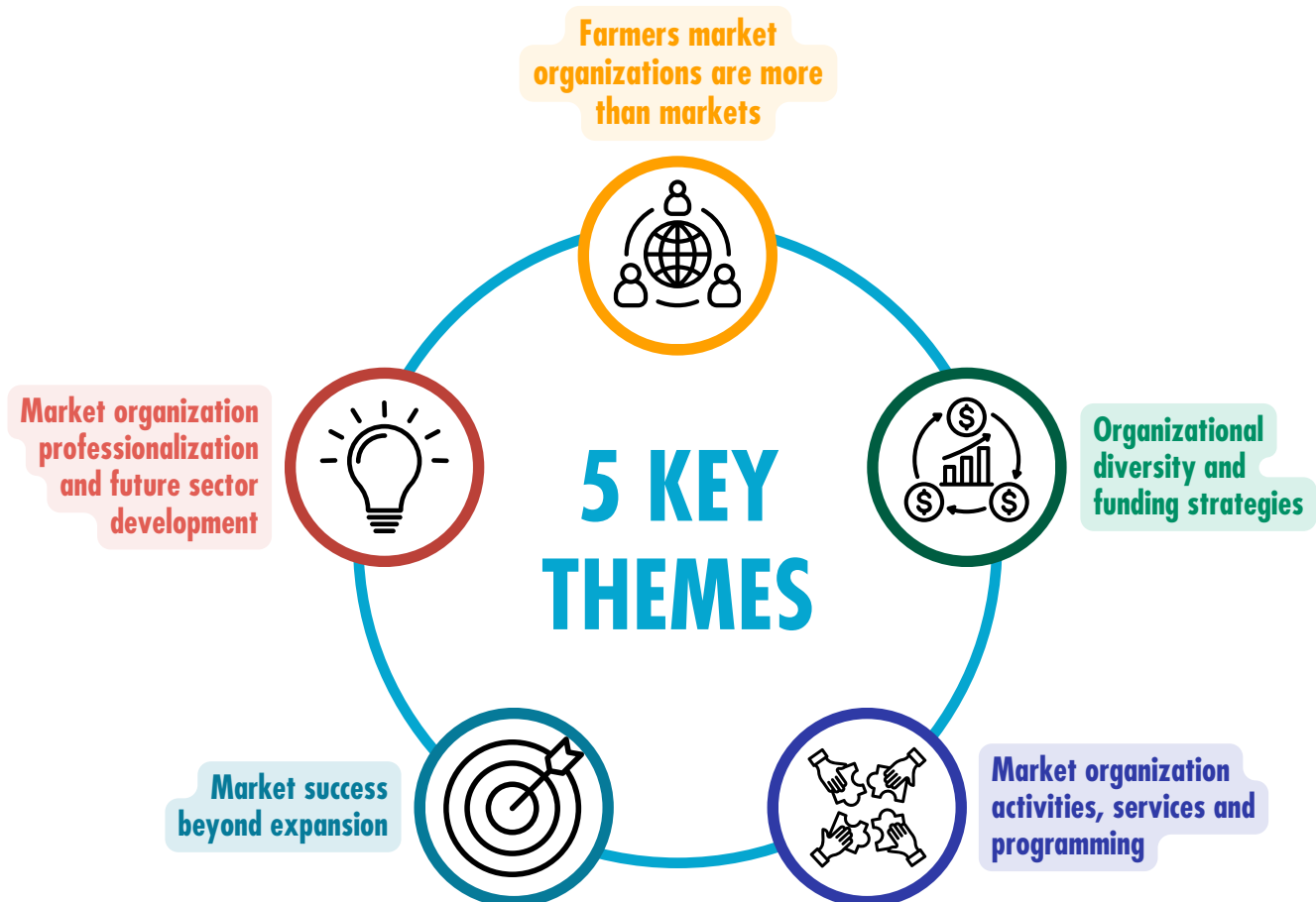
Market success beyond expansion

While the number of farmers markets in the United States has continued to increase, the rate of growth has slowed in the past decade. However, growth in the number of markets is not the only way to measure farmers market success. Market operators expressed preference for deepening engagement through activities like increasing nutrition incentive redemption, upping attendance, expanding community programming and building staff capacity. These diverse activities grow the farmers market movement in important ways. Recognizing and supporting the many possible measures of farmers market success show how they grow the roots of local and regional food systems.



Market organization professionalization and future sector development

Running a market organization is hard, often under-recognized work. There is a growing movement in the sector to make farmers market management a more recognized career opportunity (including through rapidly expanding certification programs). Others are encouraging market organizations to “professionalize” by increasing their organizational capacity in areas like risk management, fundraising, and vendor support. Such efforts, while not universally desirable for all market organizations, present an important pathway that sector leaders are exploring to enhance the impact of farmers market organizations.





Photos from the Forsyth Farmers Market, Savannah, Georgia on September 30, 2023

2. Introduction and Study Overview

2.1 STUDY BACKGROUND AND GOALS

In summer 2022, the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) invited Hilary B. King and Andrea Rissing to collaborate on a cooperative research agreement to improve the broader public's understanding of the varied roles played by organizations that run farmers markets, particularly those organizations that operate multiple farmers markets. The study sought to identify the different types of organizations that run farmers markets, to explore how market operators organize their work, and to document the kinds of activities that they undertake.

Recognizing that USDA data on farmers market organizations capture what such organizations do but fails to elucidate how or why they do so, this project took advantage of the strengths of mixed qualitative methods to explore the breadth and depth of market organizations' work and to elicit sector insight into trends, successes and challenges. The project was designed to understand the organizational strategies and practical activities employed by organizations that manage farmers markets, the range of services they provide to diverse audiences, and the broader impacts thereof. The data gathered aimed to provide a snapshot of farmers market organizations' roles within the broader direct-marketing local food economy.

Through the research, the team found that participants were keen to better understand longitudinal trends that have shaped the farmers market sector into what it is today and provide clues into its future. Thus, the team also sought to document the underlying forces that help explain the strategies, activities, and services discussed above. Importantly, this includes explicating the concepts of farmers market "expansion" and "success," two apparently straightforward topics that nonetheless emerged as contested during the research.

By better understanding interlocked dimensions of market management, the study contributes a more grounded understanding of the sector. These understandings contribute to a sector analysis that will be used to inform the development of future versions of the National Farmers Market Manager (Management) Survey.

2.2 METHODOLOGY AND TIMELINE

The mixed-methods study comprised an online environmental scan, listening sessions, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews conducted between October 2022 and June 2024.

Between February and July 2023, we conducted an online content analysis (an environmental scan, henceforth ES) of 194 market organizations' web presences to capture a high-level picture of the the various activities, strategies, and programming that farmers market organizations prioritize. As the initial impetus for this study was to improve understanding of the organizations that manage farmers markets, the ES included diverse kinds of organizations that managed one or more farmers markets.¹ In-person listening sessions were held at the Direct Agricultural Marketing Summit in October 2022 and in November 2023, and at the Farmers Market Pros InTents Conference in March 2024. We also conducted three focus groups (with 38 total participants), one in-person in Atlanta, Georgia, and two over Zoom between February and April 2024. Semi-structured interviews were completed with farmers market sector subject matter experts and executive directors of multi-market organizations from across the United States (9 interviews with 10 total participants).² In consultation with AMS, the interviews prioritized 1) subject matter experts in the farmers market sector who could speak to sector-wide trends, and 2) specific types of farmers market organizations, the first being leaders of organizations that managed the operations and administration of multiple markets and the second being entities that managed a farmers market as a program (ie, not organizations whose sole purpose was running a single farmers market).

The ES compiled a generalized snapshot of the sector and its activities on a national scale. The interviews and focus groups added context and stakeholder perspectives. This report integrates both perspectives. Activities are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Research Activities

Activity	Sample Size	Dates
Online Environmental Scan	Websites & social media of 194 organizations	02/2023 - 07/2023
Listening Sessions	Three events	10/2022, 11/2023, 02/2024
Focus Groups	Three events, 38 participants	02/2024-05/2024
Semi-structured interviews	Nine interviews, 10 participants	11/2023-06/2024

¹ To identify organizations managing farmers markets, the project generated a combined sample drawn from the following six sample frames, including 2017-2022 USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program Awardees, eight lists of farmers markets including working groups and communities of practice provided by the Farmers Market Coalition (FMC), two lists created through participatory sampling at three in-person conferences and through an online invitation to nominate markets circulated to the FMC listserv and on the Farmers Market Pros facebook group. From these lists, 799 entries were reviewed and screened to select those that met the project inclusion criteria: 1) the farmers market that was managed by an organization, 2) it had a physical location with at least two produce vendors that had operated since at least 2017, 3) that the market operated in 2022, and 4) was currently operating or had plans to operate in 2023. This process yielded the 194 farmers market organizations that were included in the ES. See the ES final report in Appendix A for additional information.

² For interviews, in-person events and online focus groups, we used a mix of purposive and convenience sampling aimed to solicit input from a variety of market organizations, including market organizations and expert stakeholders who operate in various parts of the country and in organizations of various scales (i.e., a local, regional, or national focus). While recognizing some self-selection bias in the sample (for example, our online events were shared on Facebook pages about market management and people chose to sign up voluntarily), our sampling was not meant to be statistically representative. Rather, following best practices within qualitative social sciences for exploratory studies, our sample size allowed us to hit data saturation, or a point at which we were not learning new information from the study participants despite increasing sample size. For more information, see: Hennink, M., & Kaiser, B. N. (2022). Sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research: A systematic review of empirical tests. *Social science & medicine*, 292, 114523.

Through our team’s related research project funded through a Southern SARE Research and Education Grant (for more information, please see [LS22-368](#)), we also conducted field visits to 15 markets across the Southeast and an additional 83 semi-structured interviews with a total of 92 participants. Although this report does not explicitly draw upon or present findings from LS22-368, the projects progressed on overlapping time frames and both projects’ analyses were mutually enriched by the other.

3. Results

The results are organized into five research themes:

- 1 Farmers market organizations are more than markets
- 2 Organizational diversity and funding strategies
- 3 Market organization activities, services and programming
- 4 Market success beyond expansion
- 5 Market organization professionalization and future sector development

3.1

Farmers market organizations are more than markets



What is a farmers market organization?

Defining a farmers market organization is challenging because there is no set definition of a farmers market—what an organization might manage—that applies across the country. Definitions vary by state (examples compiled [here](#)); the sector is described by experts as like the “wild west” (Interview 44). This study followed the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service’s Farmers Market Directory definition of farmers markets as a recurrent gathering of two or more farm vendors selling agricultural products directly to consumers at a common physical location.³ For this research, we considered a farmers market organization to be an entity that manages the operations and administration of one or more farmers market events on a recurring basis.

Our Definition

This project defined a farmers market 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

Farmers market organizations vary in their structure, purpose and formalization. Market organizations are diverse in their formal structures (for instance, a non-profit organization, LLC or municipal entity) as well as in the organizational responsibilities they take on (ie, an organization whose primary work is to manage multiple farmers markets as compared to a city government or university that runs a market as a program and adds many community events to its activities). More details of this variability are reviewed in section 3.2.

Farmers markets take place in certain places during certain times, but these locations are rarely the best place to look to understand the full effort and influence of farmers market organizations. Subject matter experts

³ USDA Agricultural Marketing Service. *Local Food Directories: National Farmers Market Directory*. <https://www.ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/farmersmarkets>. Accessed October 20, 2024.

distinguished between market organizations and market operations. As one sector leader put it, farmers markets can sometimes be seen as special events or parties; however, “anybody who's thrown a party or planned a wedding knows how much work went into that in the background. That is the organization” (Interview 71).⁴

Relationships between market organizations and market operations are varied, interdependent, and continually evolving, and extends far beyond visible logistics of markets. Market organizations often develop market mission, vision and strategy, create and enact partnerships outside of the market, and undertake advocacy with municipal leaders, public health agencies, other NGOs and market vendors (Interview 71). They also navigate the legal rules, physical infrastructures, and evolving technologies that allow markets to take place. In addition, market organizations create partnerships with other groups and organizations to achieve their goals and deliver programming both at and outside of market events. Sector leaders and market managers stressed that these activities extend far beyond the hours from market set-up to market tear-down (as evidenced by the activities reviewed in sections 3.2 and 3.3), thereby requiring a reorientation from farmers market events to understand the organizations that make markets possible.

Market Organizations Often:

- 1 Develop market mission, vision and strategy;
- 2 Create and enact partnerships outside of the market;
- 3 Undertake advocacy with municipal leaders, public health agencies, other NGOs and market vendors.

Market Typology(ies): Ways to Better Understand the Sector



Given the diversity of the sector, there has been interest in developing a typology for farmers markets, although this work is considered “nascent” (Interview 91) and lacks formalization. Through interviews with market organization leaders and subject matter experts, the research team sought existing frameworks and typologies used by sector stakeholders. However, existing market typologies are not well known. In focus groups, very few participants were familiar with any market typology.

Without a widely-used typology, classifying different market types and distinguishing between them can become haphazard. Some market staff expressed struggles identifying other markets sufficiently similar to their own to make meaningful comparisons. Despite the lack of a formalized typology, interview participants expressed that a typology could be helpful to:

- 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; and,
- 4 Capture the broad diversity of markets’ goals.

For one interviewee, the importance of developing a typology is to “cut through the insanity of the idea that everybody can run a market, that they are all the same, [that you can] measure them the same, do all the same things” (Interview 91). For this interviewee, distinguishing between types of markets is helpful for guiding market operators’ priorities, activities, and partnerships. Below, we review several approaches and tools that help people understand the diversity of farmers markets and their organizers.



T-shirt from the 2024 Farmers Market Pros’ InTents Conference, San Diego, CA

⁴ Quotations throughout this report have been lightly edited for clarity.

Farmers Market Coalition Market Clusters



The most familiar typology was the market clusters framework developed by the Farmers Market Coalition (FMC), pictured below. This clustering builds on the Moon Typology conceived of by Robin Moon, which was developed in concert with Market Umbrella in New Orleans in the mid-2000s (Interview 71). The image below reflects an evolving understanding of that typology developed by FMC with and for the City of Pittsburgh in 2018.⁵

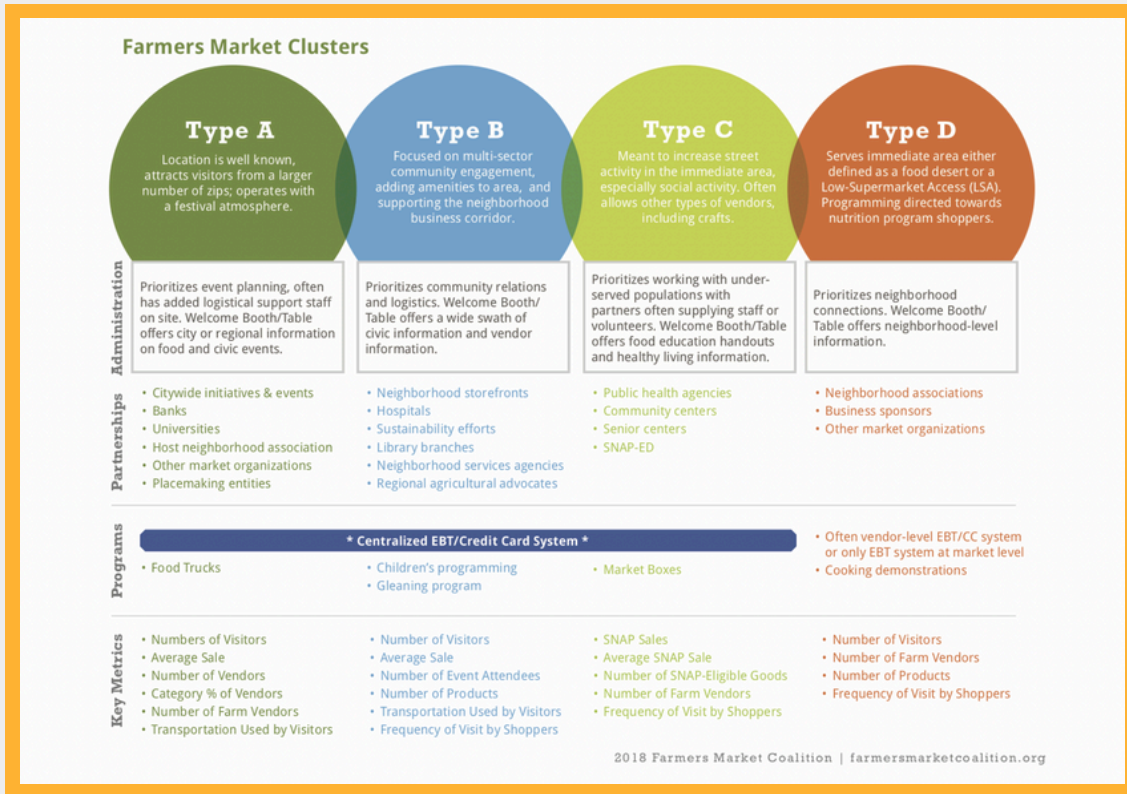


Figure 1. Farmers Market Coalition Market Clusters

Each market cluster has a different focus which manifests across all aspects of their operations. Importantly, 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, FMC 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 comes from the [Project for Public Spaces \(PPS\) Market Cities Program](#). Through the Market Cities Program, PPS is developing a network of market operators that can learn from each other in order to advance "communities rooted in well-being and equitable opportunity" (PPS 2024). Within this framework, markets can be seen as progressing from street vendors to tent markets to shed markets and potentially toward indoor public markets or market districts. Within this framework, most farmers markets operating in the US would fall under the tent market or shed market categories. 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.

⁵ At the time of this report, Robin Moon is collaborating with Darlene Wolnik of Farmers Market Coalition and Richard McCarthy of World Farmers Market Coalition to publish a peer-reviewed article on this typology. It is hoped to be forthcoming in 2025. The Market Clusters was developed in: 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.

Market Origin Stories' Impact on Market Organizations



Other participants organized their understanding of the sector by thinking about the era during which a farmers market originated. This concept showed up in several interviews as participants reflected on changes in the focus of who was starting farmers markets, and to what end. For example, one interviewee confidently identified five eras of farmers market origins: back-to-landers, neighborhood leaders, main street revivalists, public health sector, and justice-movement markets. Unprompted, a different interviewee who leads a state association reflected on similar themes, stating that:

“Older markets founded back when we were talking about alternative agriculture, and just finding ways for sales for farmers, their organizational profile is very different than the markets started in the 90s. They tend to still have vendor boards. Their mission tends to be more focused on farming. Whereas the markets that started later reflect the issues of the time - the markets started in the 2000's all want to solve the world's problems with food access.”
(Interview 91)

Interviewees sometimes situated themselves within specific market origins. Several interviewees talked about joining the farmers market sector in the 1990s as social experiments or vehicles for community organizing (Interview 44, Interview 77). More recently, resources like the Anti-Racist Farmers Market Toolkit (ARFMT) support markets' adoption of an explicit justice lens in their work. Several market organizers were part of the work group that created the toolkit, and several of these explicitly center justice-oriented farmers markets as potential sites of liberation for BIPOC people (for instance, [Come Thru Market](#) in Portland, Oregon, run by the ARFMT's editor Shiny Flanary).

At the time of writing this report, Darlene Wolnik at FMC is working on a project to explore these eras by collecting origin stories of markets across the United States. The preliminary results of this work, complemented by interviews, were used to make the illustration “Origins of the Modern U.S. Farmers Market” (p. 14 of this report).

Challenges of Creating Market Typologies



While all interviewees reflected that a typology for farmers markets could be valuable, they also stressed that such a complex endeavor would face challenges. These included that:

- 1 existing typologies do not speak to each other and are not widely shared; and
- 2 the possibility that rigid typologies accidentally precluding emergent market activities.

These concerns suggest that any farmers market typology must be flexible.

The first challenge concerns a lack of shared use of existing typologies. When asked, only a small number of interviewees had a typology that came to mind. Existing typologies serve different purposes, and their elements may not speak to each other. For instance, the infrastructure elements that are central to the PPS typology are not present in the FMC Market Clusters.

For the second challenge, some interviewees expressed concern that rigid typologies could be limiting to the sector's evolution. As one interviewee explained after we reviewed the FMC typology above:



Photo from the Grant Park Farmers Market, Atlanta, GA, on November 19, 2023

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 VARIED 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.



DRAWN BY NAFISA FERDOUS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: FUNDING FOR THIS IMAGE WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY COOPERATIVE AGREEMENT 22-TMMSD-GA-0009 FROM THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE (USDA) AGRICULTURAL MARKETING SERVICE. THE IDEAS WERE DEVELOPED BY DARLENE WOLNIK OF FARMERS MARKET COALITION IN CONJUNCTION WITH DR. HILARY B. KING, EMORY UNIVERSITY. THE CONTENTS ARE SOLELY THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE AUTHORS AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE OFFICIAL VIEWS OF THE USDA. FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT HILARY B. KING AT HBKING@EMORY.EDU.

“I think the typology [by] FMC can be helpful. As long as there's the caveat or the explanation that not all markets are going to fit in only one type, or there might be a type that's missing from that list. And so long as it's not wielded as a weapon to put markets only in one category, or to force them into an existing category when there might be some kind of innovation or community circumstance that creates a new type that we haven't yet seen or imagined. That's my only caution around a set of descriptive typologies.” (Interview 35)



In a similar vein, another interviewee described the fact that the current typology from FMC could be updated to more effectively reflect the ways that technology has reshaped the sector since the framework was conceived in 2008. As the interviewee put it in response to a question asking what they thought was missing from the FMC typology:

“I'd say probably the online aspect. You will find in the South [that] online is not as strong as it is in California and Oregon and along that coast, and probably along the northern coast, as well. ... I do think that the online market was really prevalent for 2020 and 2021 but now, you seeing that it's hanging on.” (Interview 98)



In addition to the lack of online programming visible in the 2018 FMC Market Clusters image, this quotation highlights lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the farmers market sector and demonstrates the adaptability and resilience of market operators in response to structural and market changes - a theme we return to again in section 3.4.

Important Variables for a Typology

Each typology has its own use. FMC’s market clusters are useful for helping market organizers consider how their market goals might be reflected across different variables, and to demonstrate that markets can have very different goals. The PPS forms of markets might be useful in thinking

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	Peak season vendors Off-season vendor
Organizational professionalization	Paid manager Year-round staff Succession plan
Market location	Rural/Urban Continuum Code Census Tract or County Demographics

about how markets can grow in the future. The market eras approach may help people running markets to understand why their markets operate in particular ways.

Although the original cooperative agreement proposed a preliminary typology as a deliverable, considering the complexity delineated in the findings above, our current assessment is that such a framework should be co-developed and piloted with sector stakeholders. As a starting point, we list several variables that participants frequently expressed should be included in any future typology.



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. These include risk management, partnership development and business operations.
- A farmers market organization can 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, including but not limited to state-level market associations and groups like the [Farmers Market Coalition](#). These groups have deep knowledge of how the sector works and how it has evolved.

3.2 Organizational Diversity and Funding Strategies



Farmers market organizations take diverse forms, with each type having particular legal requirements and structures (for a useful explanation of these, we recommend consulting the Farmers Market Coalition and Vermont Law School's [Farmers Market Legal Toolkit](#)). In order to understand what different kinds of organizations prioritize, we sought a baseline understanding of the diversity of organization types, structures, and funding strategies through the use of the ES. Here, we present high-level results from the ES.⁶

Organization Types and Structures

As noted above, the ES included 194 organizations.⁷ Amongst the 194 organizations, we identified 55 as multi-market organizations, 29 as organizations that primarily existed to manage a single farmers market, 28 as government organizations (at state, county, or city-levels), 26 as community development organizations, and 22 as food systems organizations, and 34 as miscellaneous (for instance, universities, real estate companies or museums) (Figure 3).



Resource

For a useful explanation of the forms that market organizations take, we recommend consulting the Farmers Market Coalition and Vermont Law School's [Farmers Market Legal Toolkit](#).

⁶ For full ES results and discussion, see Appendix A.

⁷ For sampling details, see footnote 1. These 194 organizations are not representative of all farmers market organizations in the United States. The complementary sample frames from which the ES was compiled were chosen to maximize the diversity of included organizations' types, structures, and geography.

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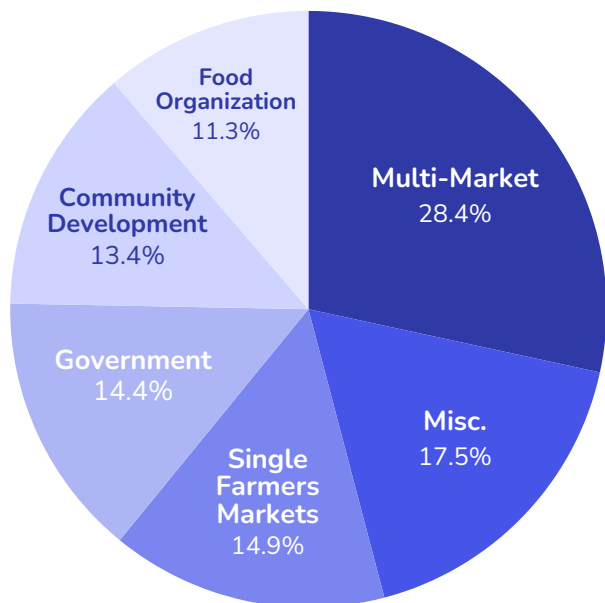


Figure 3. Organization Type
Proportion of Organization by Type

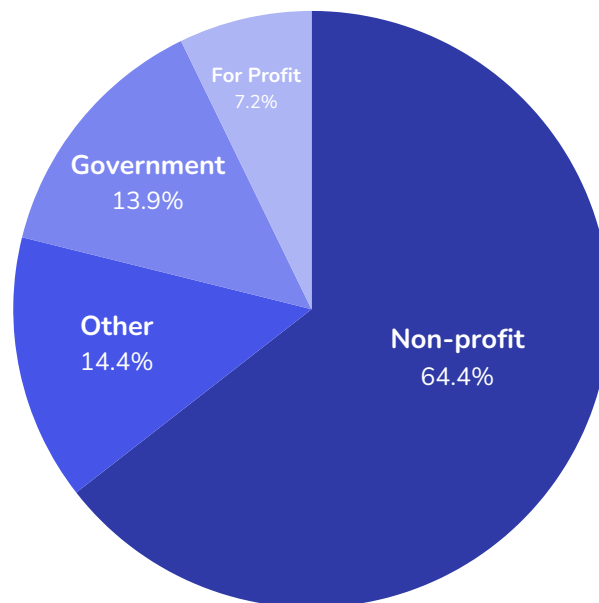


Figure 4. Organization Structures
Proportion of Organization by Structure Type

Within our sample, the most common market organizational structure was 501(c)(3) Nonprofit (n=107), followed by government (n=27), other 501(c) (n=18)¹, and for-profit (n=14) (Figure 4).

The relative dominance of market organizations structured as 501(c)(3) nonprofits is unsurprising and reflects what our team heard from interviewees and witnessed at conferences. Many forces over the past several decades have contributed to the high representation of non-profit organizations. Interviewees attributed the growth in this organization type to:

- 1 A sector-wide push to expand market organizations' educational missions;
- 2 This organizational structure enables them to meet grant eligibility requirements;
- 3 The culture and desire of many farmers market staff to serve their communities rather than focus on market organization as a business venture (though there was also an acknowledged push for a reorientation of this idea, as discussed in section 3.5).

Organizations' Funding Strategies

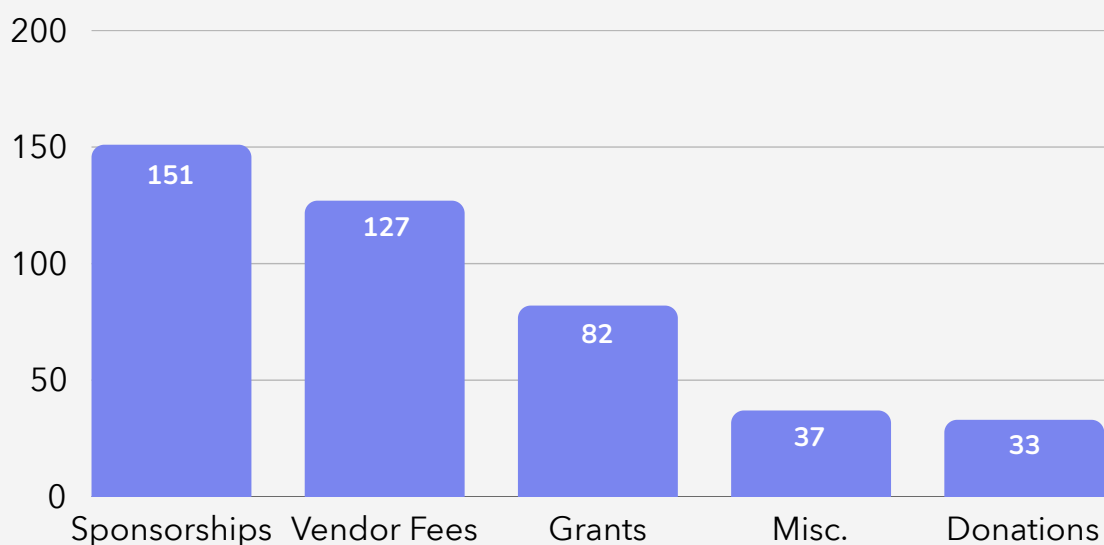
Of the 194 organizations in the sample, 167 markets share information online about their funding strategies. From available online information, the most commonly used funding strategy was sponsorships (used by 151 organizations), followed by vendor fees (127 organizations), grants (82 organizations), and donations (33 organizations) (Figure 5)⁸. These strategies are not exclusive; organizations can and do use multiple funding strategies.

While the ES found high reliance on sponsorships and grants, several interviewees and participants at the InTents Conference expressed hesitation or intimidation around pursuing these funding

⁸ This distribution does not provide information about the amount of dollars that different strategies generate, which was not often shared. Rather, it refers to the number of organizations that advertised use of this funding strategy.

sources. Applying for many grants was perceived by many attendees to have a high barrier to entry due to the need for matching funds, ineligibility of basic operational expenses for grant funding, and complex paperwork. Training and materials for obtaining sponsorships were topics of strong interest amongst managers considering how best to secure financial and in-kind support for their market operations (indeed, several InTents sessions addressed this topic explicitly). Desire for more training and tools in these areas were mentioned frequently by independent or smaller market operators in focus groups and at listening sessions. Organizations operating at a certain level of professionalization were seen to have greater capacity to secure these sources of funding.

Figure 5. Organizations' Funding Strategies



Key Findings



- Farmers markets are managed by several different types of organizations. These vary in their focus and their organizational structure.
- A large proportion of farmers market organizations are registered as non-profit organizations at the state and/or federal level. This structure eases market organizations' ability to solicit donations and apply for grants, important avenues for supporting organizations' work.
- Training to apply for grants and solicit sponsorships is of interest to many market operators. Funding agencies can decrease the barrier to entry for applying for grants through, for example, earmarking funds for first-time applicants/recipients, streamlining applications, and/or sending representatives to conferences with market staff for targeted outreach and workshops.
- Most market organizations rely on more than one stream of funding for market operations and other programming.

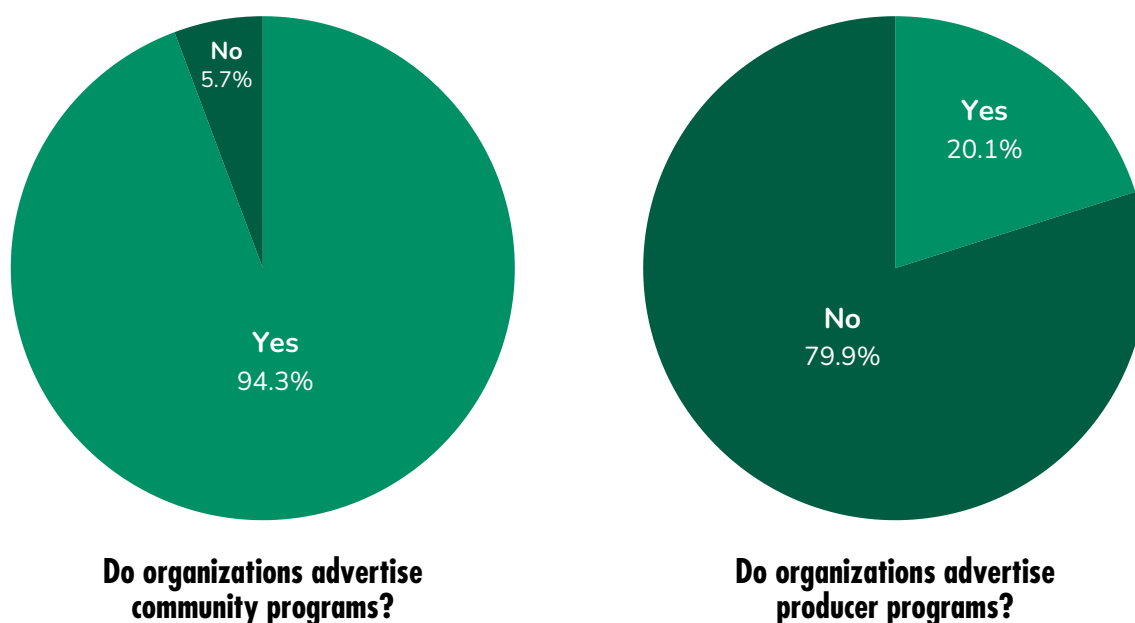
3.3

Market Organization Activities, Services, and Programming



A key goal of the ES was to identify the range of activities undertaken by market organizations. We reviewed programs provided by farmers market organizations between 2020 and 2022 and coded for programs either aimed at the broader community or aimed at producers (i.e., farmers, fishers and ranchers)⁹. Nearly all organizations (94%) offered some type of community-focused programming, whereas only 20% offered programming aimed at producers (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Proportion of Organizations Offering Community and Producer Programming



As with funding models, many organizations offered multiple types of programming. Among the organizations that offered community-focused programming, events and activities aimed at children were the most common (offered by 136 organizations), followed by cooking or nutrition programs (offered by 126 organizations) and gardening programs (offered by 111 organizations). School-based or partnered programming was offered by a small number of organizations (28) (Figure 7).

In contrast to the breadth and creativity of programming aimed at community members, relatively few organizations offered events or programming for producers (Figure 8). Of the 39 organizations offering producer-focused programming, 34% offered programming aimed at increasing business literacy, such as one-on-one consulting opportunities or workshops on successful market sales strategies. 16% of organizations offered GAP or other food safety training (such as ServSafe certification classes), that could be relevant to both producers and other vendors.

Community programs serve the public that attends a farmers market, potentially attracting customers to buy vendors' products. This contrasted with some interviewees' assessments of who farmers market organizations primarily serve. As one interviewee stated, "customers for the farmers market are the vendors, full stop" (Interview 91). Vendors are the group that pays a farmers market organization for a service, that is organizing and managing the market.

⁹ Not all farmers market vendors are producers; many vendors sell value-added products, prepared foods, and non-food items. Reflecting USDA's interest in farm vendors as the defining characteristic of a farmers market, this section of the ES tracked programming aimed at producers regardless of vendor status with the sponsoring market.

The ES only found evidence of vendor-focused programming in approximately 20% of the sample. While the ES documented programming extent and content, it cannot explain why the disparity between producer and community focused programming exists. Interviewees shed light on this by discussing, for example, how organizations often partner with other local organizations that offer workshops or events for producers. Rather than develop their own programs, some organizations preferred to cooperate with more specialized groups to cross-promote existing programming for producers and other vendors (for instance, with USDA extension services).

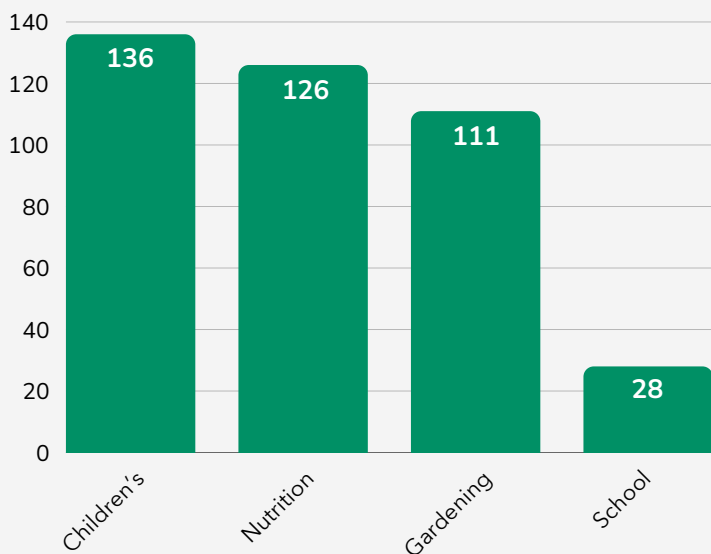


Figure 7. Types of Community Programs
Number of Organizations Offering Each Type of Program

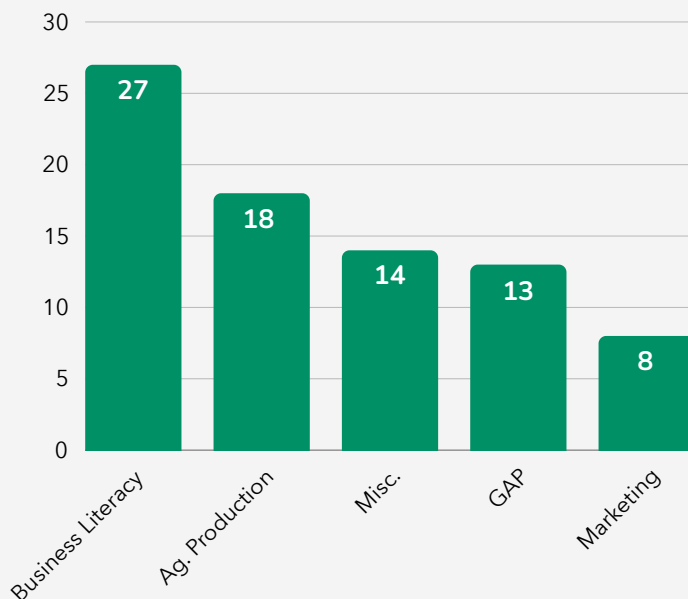


Figure 8. Types of Producer Programs
Number of Organizations Offering Each Type of Program

Interviewees also discussed the heightened role that nutrition assistance programs (i.e., facilitating market acceptance of SNAP benefits) have played in determining the professional activities of their staff. Following the early transition from paper nutrition assistance coupons into electronic benefits transfer (EBT) cards in the early 2000s, farmers market organizations across the country began experimenting with redemption options at their markets. This was supported by a USDA partnership with the National Association of Farmers Market Nutrition Programs to provide free EBT equipment to farmers markets. These initiatives were widely regarded among interviewees as successful and reflected findings in the [2019 National Farmers Market Manager Survey](#) that demonstrate that by the end of the 2010s, half of all US farmers markets accepted federal nutrition benefits in some form. The ES documented whether farmers market organizations advertised accepting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and found that almost 84% of organizations did so (Figure 9). Importantly, 75% of organizations advertised they also offered some additional incentives programs that increase the value of SNAP benefits redeemed at farmers markets.¹⁰

Most well-established farmers market organizations thus dedicate staff time and resources to facilitating SNAP redemption. This clearly promotes the accessibility of farmers market goods for low-income customers and may also increase the customer pool for market vendors, both laudable

¹⁰ The ES did not include data on other federal nutrition assistance programs often accepted at farmers markets, such as the Seniors Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) or Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

goals. For many interviewees, the acceptance of nutrition assistance programs was a source of pride. However, the move to prioritize accepting EBT also creates some challenges for farmers market organizations. First, the administrative work involved in redeeming EBT requires significant organizational resources to ensure smooth and transparent processes for vendors and customers; this can reduce available staff time for other programs or market activities. Relatedly, dedicating significant staff time to the needs of low-income customers in some cases revealed tensions and ambiguity regarding whose interests the markets prioritize. This was an area of low concordance among interviewees in the SARE project; while some vendors applauded efforts to bring in as many new customers as possible, others expressed a desire that managers focus on recruiting more customers overall rather than emphasizing those eligible for nutrition assistance (King and Rissing, forthcoming).¹¹

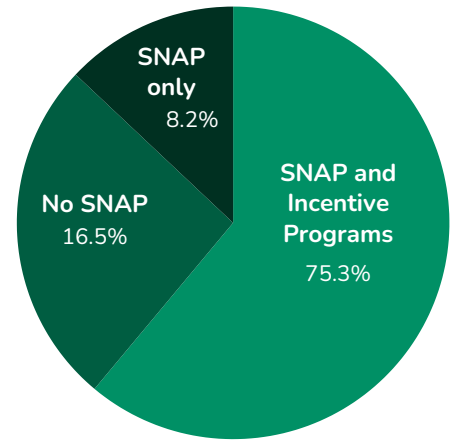


Figure 9. SNAP Benefits and Incentives Acceptance

Proportion of Organizations Advertising SNAP Acceptance and Incentive Programs

Photo from the Forsyth Farmers Market, Savannah, GA
September 30, 2023



Key Findings



- Farmers market organizations dedicate resources to supporting a wide range of activities beyond coordinating market day logistics.
- Farmers market organizations dedicate more of their internal resources towards developing, advertising, and conducting community-focused programming than vendor-focused programming.
- The vast majority of large farmers market organizations advertise that they accept federal nutrition assistance programs and most offer incentives. Such initiatives have many impacts, including improving food access for low-income customers and expanding the pool of potential customers, but they also increase the administrative burden on farmers market organization staff.

¹¹ King and Rissing are developing an article manuscript presenting these findings; preliminary results were presented at the 2024 Agriculture, Food and Human Values conference (more information in the [Abstracts and Professional Presentations](#) section of this report).

Market Success Beyond Expansion



How Market Managers Think About Success

One of the goals of our research was to better understand how farmers market organizations define and understand themselves to be successful. We investigated this through interviews and free listing exercises, uncovering a range of perspectives of what constitutes “success” for sector stakeholders.

At four events between February and April 2024, 38 respondents answered the question “How do you define success in the context of your farmers market?” Many respondents provided more than one answer; there were 157 total responses.

Responses were first grouped into twenty-four categories that captured the breadth of responses. Upon review and team discussion, these twenty-four categories were condensed into eleven, mutually exclusive categories to represent the areas in which managers defined market success.¹²

METHODS AT A GLANCE

- 4 Focus Group Discussions
- 38 Market Managers
- 157 Total Responses

Success definitions that centered Vendors (a category that included, for example, i.e. vendor sales, vendor happiness, or vendor retention, etc.) ranked highest at 24.8% (n=39), followed by the Community category (for example, i.e. community, community engagement, feedback, or support, etc.) and Customers (which included customer attendance or satisfaction) (Figure 10).

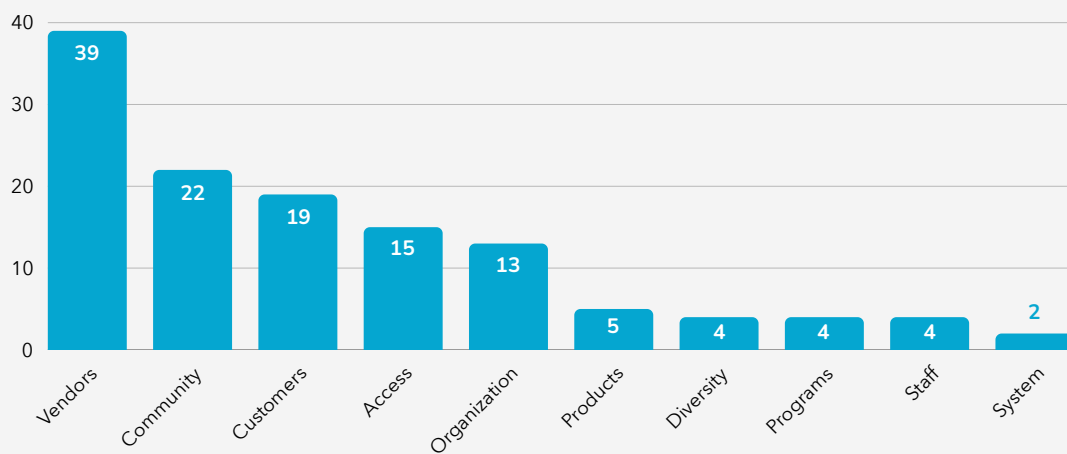


Figure 10. Categories and frequency of responses for market managers answers to: “How would you define ‘success’ in the context of your farmers market?”

¹² The second highest category, Other, included responses that did not fit into the main categories (i.e. “Good weather,” “Fun”). Due to its variability, the “other” category is not included on the graph. Though it was the second largest grouping, the diversity of answers did not reflect a coherent category.

How Market Managers Think About Market Growth

While the early 2000s saw a rapid increase in the number of farmers markets, the rate of growth in the number of new markets decreased substantially between 2014 and 2019 ([ERS 2022](#)). Despite this slowing, however, market operators had many ideas on how they would like to grow their markets. In focus groups, we asked farmers market managers to rank expansion strategies they preferred to grow their markets. Adding market locations or hours of operation ranked lowest. The top five actions linked to expansion participants wished to undertake were to:

- 1 redemption rates from food access programs;
- 2 customer attendance;
- 3 overall vendor sales;
- 4 attracting more diverse customers;
- 5 and increasing support for market staff.

As part of visualizing these varied strategies for growing farmers markets, we used the results from manager's ranking activity to develop the image on the following page for this project: "Rooting Growth: Farmers Markets Can Grow In Many Ways." The image was made from analysis of a ranking activity completed by market managers across four focus groups. The image shows tubers growing in different sizes to represent the relative popularity of that strategy as ranked by the managers.

These results show that increasing the number of farmers markets is not the priority for the market managers who responded to this exercise. This suggests that evaluating the growth of the farmers market sector principally through the number of new markets to open in a year fails to capture many ways that farmers market organizations work to increase their impact.



Photos from the Freedom Farmers Market, Atlanta, GA, on June 24, 2023

Key Findings

- Most market organizations referred to vendor outcomes and community impacts when asked to identify their definitions of success. That said, multiple additional categories, including food access, organizational success and others were also important. This suggests that there is no "one size fits all" means of defining what makes a farmers market successful.
- Market operators preferred growing their markets through activities like increasing attendance or nutrition incentive redemption over expanding the number of farmers market locations or increasing market hours. This suggests that the sector should not be evaluated primarily by the extent to which the number of markets is expanding, but rather additional metrics that capture the diverse ways market operators grow their impact.
- Formalizing and valuing diverse metrics that capture different areas of market success will help market organizations to communicate their impacts to wide varieties of stakeholders.



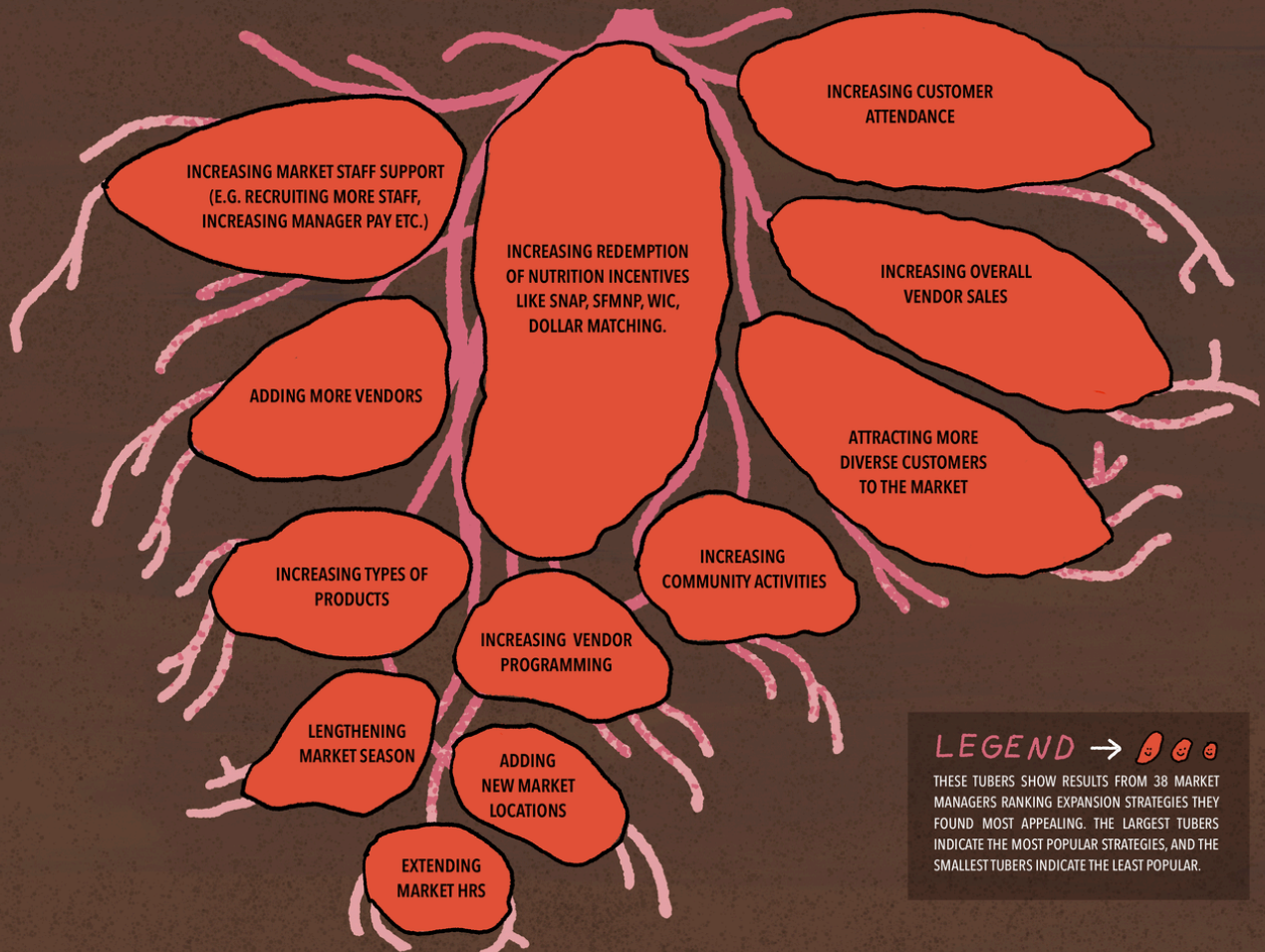
ROOTING GROWTH

FARMERS MARKETS CAN GROW IN MANY WAYS



GROWTH IN THE NUMBER OF MARKETS IS ONLY ONE WAY TO MEASURE FARMERS MARKET EXPANSION. SINCE 2019, GROWTH IN THE NUMBER OF FARMERS MARKETS HAS SLOWED.[1] HOWEVER, MARKET OPERATORS NURTURE MARKET GROWTH ACROSS VARIED DIMENSIONS. IN 2024, RESEARCHERS ASKED FOUR GROUPS OF FARMERS MARKET MANAGERS TO RANK THE STRATEGIES THEY PREFER TO USE TO GROW THEIR MARKETS. ADDING MARKET LOCATIONS OR HOURS OF OPERATION WERE THE LEAST POPULAR. MARKET OPERATORS PREFERRED STRATEGIES THAT DEEPEN ENGAGEMENT SELECTING GOALS LIKE

INCREASING REDEMPTION OF NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS, INCREASING ATTENDANCE, ATTRACTING MORE DIVERSE CUSTOMERS, UPPING VENDOR SALES AND BUILDING STAFF CAPACITY. THOUGH LESS VISIBLE THAN ADDING MARKETS, ALL OF THESE ACTIVITIES GROW THE FARMERS MARKET MOVEMENT. THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO EXPAND FARMERS MARKETS BESIDES OPENING NEW LOCATIONS. CELEBRATING MANY MEASURES OF GROWTH BETTER REFLECTS THE DIVERSE STRATEGIES THAT MARKET OPERATORS USE TO ROOT FARMERS MARKETS AS ROBUST ANCHORS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS.



LEGEND → THESE TUBERS SHOW RESULTS FROM 38 MARKET MANAGERS RANKING EXPANSION STRATEGIES THEY FOUND MOST APPEALING. THE LARGEST TUBERS INDICATE THE MOST POPULAR STRATEGIES, AND THE SMALLEST TUBERS INDICATE THE LEAST POPULAR.

¹USDA Economic Research Service. "Growth in the number of U.S. farmers markets slows in recent years." Accessed September 23, 2024.

DRAWN BY NAFISA FERDOUS

Market Organization Professionalization and Future Sector Development



Many Market Organizations Measure Their Varied Impacts and Face Challenges Doing So

A challenge that was consistently articulated across all the organization and sector leaders that we interviewed related to the ways that markets communicate their impacts. As we learned, this is an area where organizations feel they need to make improvements in how they conceive of, collect and use data about their activities and impacts.

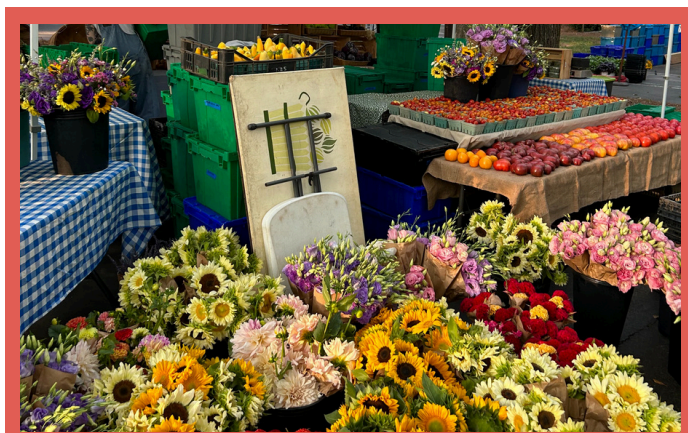
A focus on data collection and evaluation is robust amongst sector stakeholders. Existing guides to market data collection developed by sector actors could have more impact if further highlighted by organizations such as USDA. Three that were mentioned in interviews are (1) [FMC Farmers Market Metrics Training Materials](#), (2) MIFMA [Market Data Collection Toolkit](#), and (3) [Farm2Facts Market Metrics Guide](#).

Tools like these help farmers market organizations to track what happens at their markets, to develop goals and plans, and to evaluate the extents to which they are meeting the goals they have set for themselves – goals that will differ across market organization.

In focus groups, market managers recounted challenges in consistently measuring or collecting data on items like vendor sales despite this being in the top three items that managers care about when they discuss notions of “success” at their market. There are varied reasons for this, including vendors not wanting to share information that some consider personal or private. Some managers reported asking vendors to voluntarily share this data through anonymous digital forms or sheets of paper left in a box at the end of market. Given this reticence, some managers focus on metrics that fall more under their control, for example, customer attendance or aggregate nutrition incentive redemption amounts.

Measuring seemingly straightforward metrics dependably can also be challenging. As one manager in a focus group carried out in the Southeast noted, the ability to measure how many

people come to a market is highly dependent on the market location. This manager shared that their location - a centrally located public park - was ideal for attracting customers and terrible for counting them. The unlimited number of entrances and exits to the market complicated measuring attendance to use as a metric in grant applications. Similarly, high attendance does not necessarily mean that a market automatically has high sales, especially for farmer-vendors: in some interviews, managers and vendors alike referred to customers there “to Instagram” or be



Photos from the Freedom Farmers Market, Atlanta, GA, on June 24, 2023



Resources

Existing guides to market data collection developed by sector actors that were mentioned in interviews:

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



Photos from the Lafayette Farmers Market, Lafayette, LA on October 7, 2023

“looky-lou’s” rather than making purchases. This leads some markets to measure the number of educational activities that they conduct, or to select other relevant metrics. Given this, one metric markets could collect, as mentioned in a focus group, was vendor attendance rather than customer attendance at each market day. This could help a manager understand how stable their market’s foundation is.

These acknowledgments underscore the potential of tools like the National Farmers Market Management Survey to provide relevant and meaningful insights to guide sector activities.

Sector Leaders Recommend a Focus on Market Organization Capacity-building

Interviewees recognized the importance of farmers market organizations functioning smoothly and to adopt best practices for organizational management. One market organization leader summed up the need to professionalize market organizations by stating that “non-profit is a tax status, not a business model” (Interview 35). Running farmers markets takes a lot of labor and time to function outside of the market day itself, and sector leaders recognized the gaps endemic to the sector in this area. In our in-depth interviews with sector experts, we saw demonstrated examples of the ways that focusing on internal capacity building could help strengthen market organizations and improve the markets that they served.

As one executive director of a multi-market organization working in the Southeast explained, obtaining a new funding partner that could help their organization also produced expectations that their programming would rapidly expand. They noted, however, that it takes time to put the infrastructure in place for programs to grow well and be sustained. For them, this required a focus on organizational capacity building:

“When I took over... we had to grow internally. We had to hire staff, we had to get things stabilized, if you will, before we could build. And now we’re building upon that... it took about a year for us to take a breath, stabilize, get hired, get people trained up, and then now we are. I mean, we went from having no classes a week to seven plus. It’s a lot.” (Interview 98)



In this case, taking the time to build the capacity of the organization meant a slower growth curve. For the organization, this was foundational for improving their ability to administer and deliver their programs.

We saw similar patterns across other interviews. For one state level farmers market organization leader, capacity building and the professionalization of market managers was seen as paramount to the success of a market, its organization, and the sector as a whole. They noted that market managers are rarely seen as professionals with varied skills, but are rather often underpaid or working as volunteers (another interviewee pointed out, for example, that some managers are paid in credit to buy vegetables at the market they run). Unpacking the context of the sector and 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 prepare and be successful in their role. Advocating for equitable compensation for market managers has been extremely important to our organization as well. Recognizing that the turnover and market managers is extremely detrimental to markets, and that when you have a fully volunteer position or a grossly underpaid position, it's going to be even more difficult to fill that position when somebody leaves. If we're not paying market managers enough and not recognizing them properly for the role that they do and how important it is to markets, and to farmers and to customers, then we're setting ourselves up to have a really hard time backfilling those open positions. And that will cause markets to close, and it will cause markets to decline.” (Interview 35)



To address these issues, the state leader quoted above recommends the implementation of formal certificate programs and continuing education programs for managers focused specifically on skill building. Her organization offers one such program for managers, and she noted that due to this program they have seen managers negotiate for higher compensation, build confidence in presenting information about their markets to funders and the public, and increase their conflict resolution skills.

Capacity Building for Vendors, Not Only Market Staff

Our interviews also highlighted the importance some organizations put on capacity building work for their vendors, including producers. While the ES found that a minority of market organizations offered producer programming, this area may have growth potential. For example, one of our interviewees in the Southeast developed a value-added product training program that includes access to an industrial kitchen where producers who sell at the market can process and preserve farm products. This facilitates new income streams, new skills, and business incubation. The same organization also runs an online marketplace to open sales channels to customers who do not physically come to market. These examples provide models other market organizations could use to increase vendor sales and reach.



Photos from the Pepper Place Farmers Market, Birmingham, AL, on July 15, 2023

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.



Photo from the Freedom Farmers Market, Atlanta, GA, on June 24, 2023



Key Findings

- Sector and multi-market organization leaders see a desire to “professionalize” the sector, both by maturing the operations of market organizations and formalizing 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.



Photos from the Pepper Place Farmers Market, Birmingham, AL, on July 15, 2023

4. Conclusions, Recommendations and Future Directions

We conclude with several suggestions to support the ongoing vibrancy and resiliency of the farmers market sector.



Treat Market Operators as the Vital Local Food Systems Agents They Are

At the highest level, this project has illustrated the extensive array of labor-intensive, skilled activities that dedicated market organization staff across the country undertake as part of their regular jobs.

Farmers markets are a beloved and oft-celebrated linchpin of local food systems. Yet research, funding opportunities, and the media frequently frame them as simply shortened supply chains, places for "farmers" and "eaters" to come together. This oversimplification severely obscures the extensive organizational and emotional labor necessary to ensure their continued existence. From mediating personal disputes among vendors to navigating food safety's shifting legal landscapes, from social media mastery to grant writing, running a successful farmers market requires a dizzying array of parallel activities to work in tandem.

Farmers market organization staff serve critical roles in ensuring markets run smoothly, as well as in pursuing broader local food system goals of thriving small businesses, public food literacy, democratizing food access, and de-consolidating contemporary US foodways. However, their work is often under-compensated and under-recognized. Moving forward, explicit acknowledgement of the irreplaceable services provided by farmers market organization staff--including financial support for internal market capacity building, public appreciation for their roles, and targeted resources--will help rebalance the scales and ensure market organizations continue to have the personnel capacity to fulfill their missions in future years.



Market Organizations Benefit from Focusing on Internal Capacity Expansion

The concept of "expansion" can be fruitfully re-focused on market organizations themselves. Rather than expanding public programming or engagement beyond what is needed to encourage attendance at market, farmers market organizations can benefit from prioritizing organizational capacity building, including training or certification for managers, seeking support for administrative work outside of market events and developing functional internal operations. This kind of focus can support organizational longevity. Markets run better - and serve their vendors and community customers better - when the organization making the market happen is able to fairly compensate the staff upon whose labor and skills the markets depend. Funders, sponsors and community partners should also prioritize support that allows for market staff to gain the skills and support necessary to help farmers markets thrive.



Embracing Multiple Definitions of Success Reflects Diverse Sector Goals

We encourage market operators, as well as those funding markets, to think broadly and creatively about how they define success for farmers markets and the organizations that run them. Across our focus groups, participants pursued many forms of success above and beyond growth in market numbers or sales. For some markets, indicators such as vendor happiness, product diversity, and

promoting a sense of belonging among local community members were ways that they evaluated their own success (though capacity and complexity of measuring these indicators varied greatly). Rather than advocate a one-size-fits-all model, we encourage market organizations and, especially, market funders, to tailor their metrics for success to their mission. This will showcase many forms of success – a benefit in a sector which thrives when markets are meaningfully connected to the aspirations of the diverse local contexts and communities that support them.



Distinguishing Between Types of Farmers Markets is Potentially Useful and Presents Challenges

We encourage the continued development of a new formal farmers market typology (or set of typologies) that can provide a framework for market organizations to use as a tool to help guide market programming initiatives. Concurrently, however, we note that any market typologies should be used as guides only—an “official” typology should not be used to formally categorize markets or qualify/disqualify them for specific kinds of funding, for example. As we note, any set of “ideal types” is also likely to be limiting in certain circumstances and unlikely to be universally well-received.

Across our interviews, most participants were unfamiliar with existing typologies that have attempted to categorize the sector and make it more legible to interested stakeholders. Typologies should also be continually updated to reflect the evolving contours of the sector. As noted, for example, current typologies do not account for markets that include online sales channels, CSA box programs, and the like. We note that while it could be useful to make an updated market sector typology, any tools developed should be thought of as general snapshots, not exhaustive catalogs of the sector.



Expanding Collaborations with Existing Sector Leaders will Benefit USDA AMS and the Sector

The national farmers market sector is clearly diverse, dynamic, and at an important moment of change. Market organizations that manage multiple markets are influential, but comprise only a small subset of the country’s market organizations. Because market organizations are more than market events, it is crucial that future research efforts and national programming can nimbly move across different market types and sizes. These range from individual, volunteer-run markets to large multi-market organizations to state farmers market associations and nationally active policy organizations like Farmers Market Coalition.

To better understand and serve the sector, we recommend coupling broadly focused quantitative survey tools (such as the National Farmers Market Management Survey) with recurring qualitative research “deep-dives” into the experiences and concerns of specific market organizations and state associations across the country. The diversity of the sector means that there is an advantage to being able to move across national and regional scales for specific questions, but also necessitates the ability to parse differences at, for example, state levels given varied regulatory and contextual differences. The combination of “broad” and “deep” data can help illuminate contextual factors that are important at a state level but irrelevant at a national scale and vice versa, as well as to track change over time in response to evolving national, state and local policy environments. Similarly, using national level data to identify market characteristics that exemplify and/or challenge national level trends could allow for more qualitative case studies to learn the why behind such anomalies.

There is excitement in the sector around data that can facilitate the identification of meaningful differences between markets. We see the upcoming National Farmers Market Management Survey as a potential source of such representative, queryable data. That data collection and analysis process could be used to support the creation of an updated market typology informed by meaningful stakeholder-engagement. Such an endeavor would contribute insights that farmers market organizations can use to better achieve their diverse goals.

5. Project Outputs and Appendices

In addition to this report, we include the following outputs related to the project:

5.1 ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN REPORT

See Appendix A.

5.2 ABSTRACTS OF PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS

King, H. and Rissing, A. "Professionalization required: How prioritizing food access shapes farmers market organizations." Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society & Association for the Study of Food and Society Annual Conference. Syracuse, NY. June 7, 2024.



Abstract: Far greater diversity in market organizational strategies exists than has typically been recognized: from multi-market organizations to municipal governments, community development groups, and festival or real estate companies; the activities undertaken by these organizations vary by sector yet show common practices nationally. To begin to understand these patterns, we take as our starting point two trends that have driven major changes in farmers markets over the past two decades: increasing professionalization of market management, and increasing farmers market participation in the web of federal food assistance programs (i.e., SNAP and WIC). While consumer experiences of nutrition incentive programs has received ample attention, the impact of these trends on market organizations and managers has received less attention. Markets must professionalize to successfully navigate federal grants and food assistance requirements; this paper explores the intersection of these two trends. When and how did these movements begin, and to what cultural and political drivers were they responding? How have these trends affected market organizations' goals and activities? And what are the broader food system consequences thereof? We present results from an online content analysis of 195 farmers markets' activities, structures, and funding strategies to explore whether market organizations displaying a higher level of professionalization pursue different kinds of goals and undertake different kinds of work. We combine these results with narratives from interviews with farmers market managers and subject matter experts in the field to contextualize findings and provide stakeholder reflections on these changes.

This paper will be developed into a journal article in fall 2024.

King, H. and Rissing, A. "What does local mean to markets? Moving beyond where to grow your market community." InTents: The Farmers Market Conference. San Diego, CA. March 6, 2024.



Interactive presentation guided an audience of ~100 farmers market managers through five distinct meanings of 'local' food and how naming these can support coalition-building as well as thinking about success. Provided facilitation guide and color comic for attendees to use with their own staff.

King, H. and Rissing, A. "Management Styles, Vendor Clusters and Market Cohesion: Learning from Qualitative Research on Farmers Market Organizations." Farmers Market Federation of New York Monthly Members & Friends Meetup. Syracuse, NY. [Zoom presentation](#). January 21, 2024.



Abstract: How does your approach as a market manager shape your vendors' experiences? This presentation shares early results from two qualitative studies on how farmers market management impacts vendor economic viability and quality of life. Through examples and stories from the southeastern US, anthropologists Hilary B. King and Andrea Rissing will 1) cover different market management styles, activities and associated vendor responses, 2) review market management priorities around which vendors cluster and split, and 3) share recommendations for clarifying your own market style to increase market cohesion. This research is on-going, so attendees in this session will also have the opportunity to participate in paid feedback opportunities in the future.

The analysis in this presentation has contributed to this report.

Kiskis, S. and King, H. "What Farmers Markets Manage To Do: Exploring the Diverse Work of Varied Farmers Market Organizations." National Agricultural Marketing Summit, Washington, DC. November 13, 2023.



This interactive workshop presents early findings from an ongoing research study on organizations that manage farmers markets. Far greater diversity in market organizational strategies exists than has typically been recognized: from multi-market organizations to municipal governments, community development groups, and festival or real estate companies; the activities undertaken by these organizations also vary by sector yet show common practices nationally. A collaboration with the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), this project seeks to better understand the variation in market organizational strategies, and also the different outcomes of and explanations for these variations. The goal of the study is to provide market organizations with actionable recommendations and pathways to help them meet their goals.

King, H. and Ellis, A. "Managing Markets: Exploring the Impact of Farmers Market Management." National Agricultural Marketing Summit, Pensacola, FL. October 25, 2022.



Differences in farmers market management represent a key but under-recognized factor impacting farmers' economic viability and quality of life. Increasingly, farmers markets and their managers face pressure to professionalize, including working to provide services to vendors and to customers. These activities can range from incentive programs like double EBT to vendor business support and joint marketing campaigns. Little is known about how external market management structures affect producers' experiences and shape local food systems. Through this interactive workshop, participants will collaboratively 1) identify the range of strategies through which farmers markets run by organizations seek to support their vendors, 2) evaluate benefits and challenges associated with those strategies, and 3) explore how market managers and producers see these strategies shaping direct-market experiences. Through this session, participants will network with others to increase their knowledge of farmers market structures and programming, means of financing and operating different programs, and the ways that managing markets shapes local food systems.

5.3 ILLUSTRATIONS

Drawn by Nafisa Ferdous, included in this report:

- 1 "Origins of the Modern U.S. Farmers Market"
- 2 "Rooting Growth: Farmers Markets Can Grow in Many Ways"



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