Growing Farmers Markets in Northern New York: Improving Community Development, Food Access, and Farm Returns

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What is the Issue?
Consumer interest in local foods has increased sharply in recent years prompting substantial changes in food supply chains. The increased use of direct marketing channels by producers, such as farmers markets, is an important market mechanism linking farmers and consumers. Farmers markets have also attracted the attention of policymakers concerned about consumers’ ability to access affordable nutritious diets, particularly in lower-income rural areas where there is less incentive for food retailers to provide a wide assortment of food products.

Target variety in products and vendors. Wider product assortments can support a one-stop shopping environment, improve consumer convenience, and increase customer traffic. “Variety” should consider the balance between organic and conventional products, food and non-food vendors, and fresh and processed foods. Attracting full-time farmers with larger product supplies and potentially lower unit production costs may offset deficiencies in other local food supply chains.

Assessing Farmers Market Vendor Performance
Based on recent research in a six-county region of Northern New York (NNY), we identified several factors driving the performance of farmer market vendors, yielding valuable planning information to farmers and managers of farmers markets. In addition, we provide policy recommendations for community leaders and policy makers. A conceptual framework for our approach is outlined in Figure 1.

Vendor performance is measured in both objective (financial) and subjective (satisfaction) dimensions. This distinction is important; some vendors may utilize farmers markets as a way to advertise their farm/products available through other channels, while others may simply appreciate the opportunity to interact with customers and/or promote particular forms of production. Improved vendor performance is expected to enhance the overall economic sustainability of the markets they participate in, thereby improving food access and strengthening the social capital of rural communities.

Improving Farmers Market Viability
We offer four inter-related planning recommendations when considering private strategy and public policy interventions.

Larger, centrally located markets. Centrally located regional/multi-community markets can increase customer traffic and support higher vendor recruitment with larger product assortments. Site selection is critical and can benefit from public and private stakeholder input and municipal investments in market amenities. Larger markets increase managerial responsibilities, so vendor-controlled organizations, such as farmers markets cooperatives, may provide an improved governance structure to support a wider diversity of stakeholders. The availability of credit/debit card readers at these markets can also increase purchasing convenience.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework assessing vendors’ farmers market performance and linkages to public policy and market strategy interventions.

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