



Crossroads Resource Center

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Tools for Community Self-determination

How local economic analysis can help focus community engagement

& How one local foods campaign used Crossroads' analysis
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One of the most requested types of local economic analysis has been Crossroads Resource Center's "Finding Food in Farm Country"TM analysis. This has been instrumental to local food organizing in locales in several regions in Minnesota, Iowa, Arizona, California, Hawai'i, Florida, and North Carolina, and elsewhere.

Crossroads' data often gives people a new way of looking at the farm and food economy. Still, our analysis by itself does not incite action. Strenuous local efforts are required to organize regional food networks, and to make use of the data's findings in so doing.

What seems to work best is to present the same local economic analysis **several times in the same community**. This allows people to take in what they can on the first hearing, and to return to fill in details they may not have caught the first time. Also, repeat presentations offers local stakeholders a chance to speak with each other, do their own background research, and reflect on the material that has been presented. This adds depth and independence to local analysis.

Many times, the audience finds the revelations **startling**, since data show a reality far different from what people assumed to be true. Further, this is a great deal of information to take in at one time — many people have been eager to participate in discussions two or more times so they can fully understand the analysis presented, and learn to better make use of it.

Further, it is important that two things happen in addition to presenting data. One, each presentation should have a **question-and-answer period** right after the data is shown. This allows people to challenge the speaker, to offer alternative views, and to make sure they have the details straight. We have found that even people who do not generally like financial data find our material (in their words) "riveting." People stay for long and thoughtful discussions.

Second, Crossroads strongly encourages those who convene public meetings to follow up this discussion, perhaps at the same conference, perhaps a few weeks later, time for participants to **make specific strategic plans** making use of the data — while these insights are fresh. At times, these implementation discussions have actually occurred after a second (or third) presentation of the data, and after many months have elapsed.

It also seems to be useful to make presentations to **increasingly large audiences**, so those in the audience in the first stages can invite friends, neighbors and colleagues to attend subsequent events. This is a fairly organic way of building a constituency for local foods work.

We have found that local economic analysis may **serve several functions**:

- (a) Identifying local economic assets before performing a "needs assessment" is more empowering to the community, since this helps residents to understand the resources they can apply to problems that may emerge, before those problems are even defined.
- (b) Local stakeholders will often unify their efforts around a credible data set—rather than debating local conditions without reference to good data.
- (c) Solid analysis well presented helps to get new partners and supporters involved. Funders and investors, in particular, like to see economic data.
- (d) Solid analysis can also help local participants gain a deeper, more systemic knowledge of conditions they face.
- (e) Local stakeholders are more likely to understand the local economy's actual strengths and limitations (rather than what is habitually assumed) if they have examined solid data and analysis.
- (f) Local economic analysis also helps local participants understand deeper economic dynamics that tend to work against local efforts, if not properly managed.
- (g) This in turn assists local partners to create more effective local policies that build health, wealth, connection and capacity in productive communities.
- (h) Baseline data compiled in this study is essential in evaluating the subsequent progress of local initiatives.
- (i) Further, if participants agree on the front end about their analysis of the issues they face, they are more likely to agree about how to construct a logic model, or theory of change, that helps them monitor progress in their initiative.

One solid example — Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition

A good example of how local economic analysis has been used is Northeast Iowa, where local farmers, lenders, businesspeople and consumers are working together to form the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition. This effort has been coordinated by Iowa State University county extension offices in the region, with support from the Regional Food Systems Working Group of the Aldo Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, also based at Iowa State University. Here is a brief sketch of how this effort used Crossroads' local economic analysis.

- (a) Crossroads initially performed a study of the local food economy for GROWN Locally, a cooperative of growers centered in Postville. Funding was provided by the Aldo Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture and the ALCES Foundation. These data were first presented to coop members in November, 2004.

- (b) In May, 2005, Iowa State University Extension invited Crossroads to present this data to a group of 32 area farmers. This group of local representatives from corn and bean growers, pork producers, dairymen, cattlemen, and produce growers associations had been meeting for some time in an effort to strengthen their economic position. The fact these groups were all meeting together to come up with a common agricultural approach showed both their seriousness of purpose, and the frustrations they felt in the prevailing economy.
- (c) After considerable discussion of Crossroads' findings, and after verifying the data with several independent economic experts, local leaders formed the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition to launch initiatives to improve the food economy. With support from Iowa State University Extension and the Aldo Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, the emerging coalition invited Crossroads to present its regional farm and food economy data to a new group of 35 residents in November, 2005. This group included some of the original farmers, representatives of the local chamber of commerce, three lenders, an implement dealer, other local businesspeople, extension agents and others.
- (d) Over the winter, the coalition drafted a strategic plan for a new local foods effort, focusing expansion of food production and processing in the region. As a way of attracting new participants in the effort, the coalition held three meetings in March, 2006. Crossroads presented its economic data to three meetings, one in each county which the new coalition covered. A total of 90 residents attended. Following discussion of this data, the Coalition unveiled its draft strategic plan, asking participants to comment so it could be refined.
- (e) A few months later, the Coalition was able to arrange for Crossroads to present data to the Decorah area Rotary Club at its June, 2006, meeting. Forty-five people attended. Once again, a deeply thoughtful discussion attracted new interest, and new support, for the Coalition.
- (f) On the same day, the Coalition and the local food cooperative co-sponsored a public meeting for 65 people. This was also an effort to build a stronger constituency for local foods. Coop sales expanded 22% in 2005. Crossroads' data has been a prime educational tool for the coop.
- (g) On the basis of the enthusiasm and motivation generated in these meetings, an asset-based local economic analysis was built in as a part of the Leopold Center's model for local groups to use in constructing a local food system (August, 2006).
- (h) The Leopold Center further decided to allocate implementation funds to the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition, based on the region's strategic plan.
- (i) Northeast Iowa Resource Conversation and Development, Inc. will host the Iowa League of RC&Ds meeting in Decorah in October, 2006. They asked Crossroads to keynote this event to help elected officials from across the state understand the economic realities of agriculture and local foods projects. They also want Crossroads to help these leaders understand how the information can be used to generate interest for

current and future RC&D projects, and increase local food consumption across the state of Iowa. (RC&D boards are comprised of county supervisors and commissioners of county Soil and Water Conservation Boards.)

Of course, all this action was initiated by local leaders. This outline is not meant to suggest that economic data was the only important factor, nor that it held more importance than local community efforts to build a unified strategy.

Brenda Ranum, Winneshiek County extension agent who has been one of the key leaders of the effort, says that Crossroads' local economic data helped participants "see the need for developing new regional food marketing channels, in addition to existing commodity markets." Ranum adds that the data also played a key role in motivating newcomers to become active participants.

Had the data we compiled not conformed to what many residents perceived, it would not have been useful. On the other hand, had it not challenged local residents to think more deeply, it would also not have played an important role.

Partners in the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition (as of September 20, 2006)

Winneshiek County Corn & Soybean Association
Winneshiek County Cattlemen's Association
Winneshiek County Dairy Promoters
Winneshiek County Pork Producers
GROWN Locally (food producer cooperative)
Decorah Farmer's Market
Farm Bureau Federation (regional office for 5 counties)
Oneota Food Coop, Decorah
Spillville Locker
Wapsi Produce
Lynch Livestock
Iowa State University Extension
NE Iowa Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) District
Upper Exploreland
County Economic Development Offices (5 county region)
Lenders from various banks in our region
Northeast Iowa Community College (NICC)
Luther College

For more information about the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition, contact:

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For further information on Crossroads' local economic analysis: www.crcworks.org/rural.html.