

Vermont Farm to Plate Network

VERMONT ORGANIZATIONS WORK TO ACHIEVE COLLECTIVE IMPACT AND TRANSFORM A FOOD SYSTEM



Photo credit: The Little Nell, www.flickr.com/photos/126226444@N08/14694789736



Vermont is a small state with a big vision for strengthening its food system. From 2009 to 2014, Vermont developed its food sector significantly – adding 3,486 direct jobs and 645 farms and food businesses. Because of expansion of the local food system, the state has experienced increases of \$747.1 million in gross state product and close to 9,000 new jobs. Also, for three consecutive years, Vermont has ranked first on the Locavore Index, a measure of the availability and consumption of locally-produced foods.

Vermont's remarkable success in the food sector can be attributed to collective impact – specifically the creation of a network that is now more than 350 organizations strong with over 500 people representing those organizations, and systematically implementing a shared vision for a sustainable food system.

The effort to transform Vermont's food system is being coordinated by the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund (VSJF). The Vermont legislature created this nonprofit organization in 1995 to accelerate the development of the state's green economy. While VSJF works in many areas of green economic development, including renewable energy, forest products, and nutrient management, their approach to strengthening Vermont's food sector has been particularly innovative and transformative and serves as a valuable model for communities, regions and states around the country.



Courtesy of Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund

PROCESS

THE VISION — A COMMON AGENDA

The Vermont Farm to Plate (F2P) Network arose out of a clear vision and set of goals for the future of Vermont's food system, which began in 2009 when the Vermont legislature created the Farm to Plate Investment Program. The legislation ([Sec 35 10 V.S.A. Chapter 15 330](#)) tasked the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, in consultation with the Vermont Sustainable Agriculture Council, to develop a 10-year strategic plan and established three overarching outcomes:

- Increase economic development in Vermont's food and farm sector;
- Create jobs in the food and farm economy; and,
- Improve access to healthy local foods.

To develop this plan, VSJF staff spent 18 months working with nine researchers, a GIS specialist, and several interns and volunteers. The team conducted research and consulted with more than 1,200 Vermonters, ranging from interested consumers to experts in the field. The staff also analyzed existing data sets, conducted in-depth stakeholder interviews, and held focus groups, regional public input events, and summits to gather information and ideas that could be used to inform the plan.

Starting in January 2011, VSJF began releasing chapters of the Farm to Plate Strategic Plan.² The plan boldly outlined a clear vision for transforming Vermont's food system by focusing on key leverage points and establishing 25 goals for advancing this vision. For each goal, the plan identified strategies, actions and key indicators that enable the Network to gauge the impact of its work.³

STRUCTURING THE NETWORK — MUTUALLY REINFORCING ACTIVITIES

As her organization prepared to release the Strategic Plan, VSJF Executive Director Ellen Kahler began thinking about the type of governance structure needed to bring together a diverse group of partners already working on the food system — ranging from the Agency of Agriculture to farmers to industry advocates — to implement the 25 goals established in the plan. "While attending the first New England Food Summit in March 2011, I learned about an innovative network model in the Midwest that a group called [RE-AMP](#) was using," said Kahler. "As I learned more about their collective impact efforts to reduce GHG emissions and shut down coal-fired power plants across an eight-state region, it became clear to me that we needed

ACHIEVING COLLECTIVE IMPACT

In 2011, John Kania and Mark Kramer of FSG took the opportunity to review the work of networks around the country that were working for social change. They sought to distill out the key ingredients of successful networks that enable the alignment of partners to achieve results. Their work identifies five key conditions to achieving "*collective impact*":

Common Agenda: Participants have a shared vision for change, common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solutions.

Shared Measurement: Data and results are collected consistently to ensure alignment and promote accountability across participants.

Mutually Reinforcing Activities: Participant activities are complementary and coordinated through a plan of action.

Continuous Communication: There is consistent and open communication to build trust, assure mutual objectives and create common motivation.

Backbone Support: The network is supported and managed by staff of one or more organizations.

For more information about the Collective Impact Model:

Stanford Social Innovation Review at
http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact

to take a network approach to implementing the Farm to Plate plan. We needed a structure and governance model that functioned more like an ecosystem, one that could easily adapt as changes within the food system emerged."

The launch of the Network required careful work and preparation. VSJF first met with key partners to secure their support for the concept. "Once we had enough buy-in from our partners," explains Kahler, "we crafted an overview document that explained how the Network would be structured, what our shared values would be, how to become a Network member, and so on. We organized the first Network gathering in October 2011 to formally launch the Network, and provide important training in what it means to work in a 'networked-way'. Curtis Ogden ([Interaction Institute for Social Change](#)) and Beth Tener ([New Directions Collaborative](#)) served as our Network trainers and they were invaluable in helping us get started on the right foot."

F2P NETWORK: SHARED VALUES

Equity: We strive to build a food system where fresh, healthy, local/regional food is accessible, available and utilized by all Vermonters.

Interdependent and collaborative: The F2P Network is built on the strength of relationships and trust within the Network and is inherently interdependent. The Network recognizes that collective impact is greater than the impact any organization can achieve alone.

Decentralized shared leadership and accountability: The F2P Network recognizes the need for shared leadership and responsibility across many organizations to accomplish the broad set of strategies needed to achieve the F2P Goals.

Transparent and inclusive: The F2P Network values open communication and includes a diverse array of organizations.

Systems thinking: We live in a world of linked systems — from local to regional to global. The F2P network values understanding the “whole” while others are moving the “parts” forward.

Data driven: Our strategies and action plans are based upon analysis of data and on-the-ground experience; indicators of progress are tracked and reviewed by the F2P Network so that our programs and initiatives can be evidence based and best practices can be replicated.

Deliberate: We value intentional and ongoing reflection and performance evaluation to ensure we stay focused, relevant and adaptive to changing conditions in the marketplace.

Kahler recalls that the trainers asked Network members to engage with each other in a new way for a one-year trial period and outlined two minimums the Network had to meet within that trial. “First, the Network had to lead to more sophisticated collaboration, capable of effectively implementing and reaching the Strategic Plan’s 25 goals; and secondly, it had to be of value to individual organizations in the Network, delivering more funding, new relationships, or greater market intelligence.”

The Network passed the test and in three years has grown from 125 organizational members to over 350. While the Network does not allow individuals to become members, it is open to the full range of organizations, agencies and businesses. Erica Campbell, the F2P Program Director, describes the process of recruiting members as “come one, come all” with membership open to all farms, food enterprises, and food system-related trade associations, co-ops, public agencies, nonprofit organizations, private funders, and community groups. “The hallmarks of the culture we’ve established within the Network are shared accountability and shared leadership. The systems change we seek cannot be accomplished by any one organization on their own. So we need each organizational member to bring their core competencies, experience and insights to this work. We all have a piece of the puzzle to contribute.”

The Network is overseen by a steering committee and is organized into working groups, task forces and cross-cutting teams each centered around key systems-change leverage points. Campbell describes the Network as “self-governed and decentralized, yet also highly integrated and coordinated. It’s built to adapt over time, to take advantage of ever changing market dynamics that emerge.”

“I am a firm believer in a systems approach that leverages networks and systems mapping (which the Farm to Plate Strategic Plan has provided) to move broad and important efforts like this forward. Over the past year, I have been able to give numerous talks to Commissioners of Agriculture in other states — especially those in New England — extolling the incredible success we are achieving here in Vermont. I tell them that in large part our success is because of the common agenda we have built through the Farm to Plate planning process, and now the coordinated action between 350+ members of the Farm to Plate Network.”

— Chuck Ross, Secretary, Vermont Agency of Agriculture,
Food & Markets

WORKING GROUPS

The F2P Network was originally organized into six working groups. To select the working group areas of focus, VSJF reviewed the Strategic Plan and looked for related strategies. Explains Kahler, “We were looking for those areas of focus that got at root cause issues the ways that the current food system was not meeting the needs of consumers and producers.”

According to Erica Campbell, “Working groups are really at the core of the Network and are organized around key leverage areas.⁴ Specific actionable strategies get generated in these groups and they keep track of important developments in the marketplace.”

- [Consumer Education and Marketing](#)
- [Education and Workforce Development](#)
- [Production and Processing](#)
- [Aggregation and Distribution](#)
- [Farmland Access and Stewardship](#)

Each working group has a chairperson who helps to set the agenda and coordinate the group. The chairperson's organization provides staffing to the working group — this helps to distribute leadership and resources across the network members. To date, VSJF has also been able to offer funding to support each chairperson, ranging from \$7,500 — \$10,000 per year for a chair, and \$5,000 per year for a co-chair.

“RAFFL has been an active participant in the F2P Network since its inception. As an organization with a localized focus on the food system within our area of the state, we have benefited tremendously from being connected to this network. We draw from VSJF staff and the whole network as a source of information with research capacity to unravel some of the more complex issues we face. Attending working group meetings provides us with perspective and connections to colleagues around the state. This has created an exponential increase in our learning and development as an organization — and we have been able to contribute our in-depth local experience and knowledge to the learning of the whole state.”

— Tara Kelly, Executive Director of the Rutland Area Farm & Food Link, and chair of the F2P Aggregation & Distribution Working Group

Network members can join any number of working groups, but must commit to being active participants. Together, working group members are responsible for furthering a set of goals and strategies and helping to find the funding necessary to support the projects they decide to work on collaboratively. Working groups are able to form task forces to advance strategies and high-impact action. Task forces have completed a number of projects, including: developing and running a high school summer institute on food systems; conducting research on workforce needs; developing agriculture land use planning modules for local and regional planners; and assessing opportunities and barriers for getting more local food into independent grocery stores. Other task forces have taken a long-term approach to building a community of practice including the Food Cycle Coalition, which focuses on food rescue and organics management and the **Farm to Institution Task Force** that provides a forum to discuss institutional procurement.

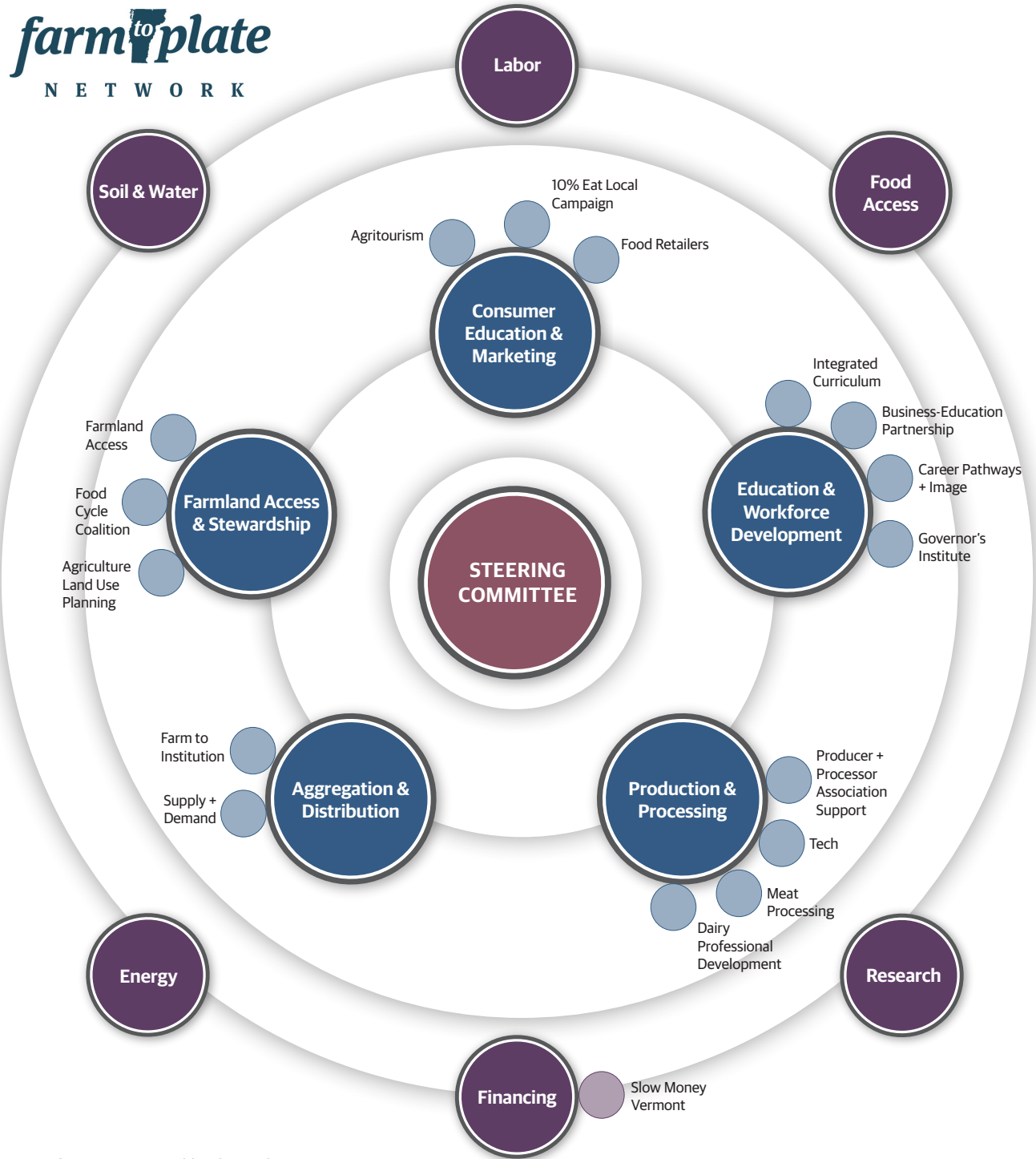
“My business, Grow Compost of Vermont, has benefited greatly from being part of the Food Cycle Coalition Task Force. This group has been essential to developing relationships and collaborations between businesses, nonprofits and government agencies.” — Lisa Ransom

The Food Cycle Coalition members have come together to develop strategies for helping the state implement its Universal Recycling Law (passed in 2012) move away from landfilling valuable resources such as food waste to capturing them through gleaning and food rescue initiatives, to transforming them into agricultural feed, compost and renewable energy production.

Cross-Cutting Teams. Cross-cutting teams (CCT) serve as liaisons between the F2P Network and other statewide networks. They can serve as “community of practice” groups to exchange best practice and information, and also play a consultative role to the F2P Network. For instance, there are food access issues that are integral to every Working Group and many Task Forces (e.g., Farm to Institution Task Force which explores getting more local, healthy food into hospitals, schools, and colleges for all types of consumers) within the Network. So far, six cross-cutting teams have formed, including:

- [Food Access](#)
- [Financing](#)
- [Energy](#)
- [Soil and Water](#)
- [Labor](#)
- [Research](#)

F2P NETWORK DIAGRAM



Courtesy of Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund

Steering Committee. Oversight of the F2P Network is provided by a 10-member steering committee. It is their responsibility to identify gaps in strategies, develop processes for learning, organize the annual F2P Network Gathering, approve mini-grant requests (up to \$10,000) made to the F2P Network Fund, and shape the evolution of the network infrastructure over time. The steering committee includes the five working group chairs, a co-chair of the Food Access Cross-Cutting Team, as well as the Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of Commerce, a representative of the VT Agriculture and Forest Products Development Board, and a representative of the VT Food Funders Network.

Network Coordinator — Backbone Support. The VSJF serves as the backbone organization supporting the work of the F2P Network. The Network is supported by a full-time director, as well as two fulltime staff members. As Network Coordinator, VSJF does not have a seat on the steering committee, though they do facilitate their meetings. Rather, they work in service to the entire Network, providing administrative and logistical support, and gathering data and reporting progress. Annually the VSJF reports progress made towards reaching the 25 Farm to Plate goals to the Vermont Legislature, revises the strategic plan as needed, maintains the [Vermont Farm to Plate website](#), organizes the annual F2P Network Gathering and other professional development trainings and assists with major fundraising efforts to support the work of the Network.

Key Attributes of the Network Coordinator:

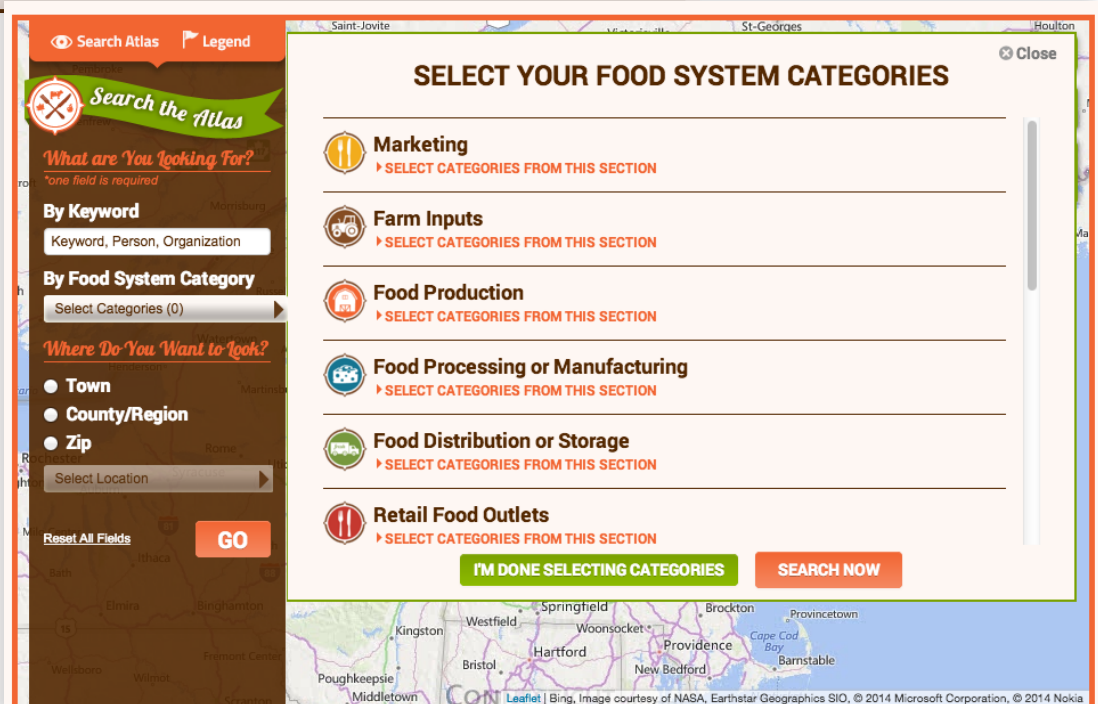
- Attentive and receptive to others needs
- Ability to multi-task
- Can see interconnectedness between people and ideas, and help link them together (also known as 'network weaving')
- Ability to communicate to a diverse group of stakeholders / good at two-way communication
- Ability to work with different personalities and leadership styles
- Adaptive leadership style (often it's being supportive, sometimes it is more directive, and still other times helping to empower/motivate)
- Ability to do data analysis and visualization
- Strong oral and written communication and group facilitation skills
- Have a high degree of energy and enthusiasm for Networks and for process



Photo credit: SARE Outreach, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/sare-outreach/12799981705>

VERMONT FARM TO PLATE WEBSITE — CONTINUOUS COMMUNICATIONS

Consistent with the conditions of collective impact, the F2P Network needed to ensure continuous communication between Network members. The [Vermont Farm to Plate Website](#) serves that function. It features thousands of resources, including farm and producer stories and videos, job listings, data, and a map searchable by people, location, keyword, and category, in addition to all sections of the Farm to Plate Strategic Plan. The Atlas also acts as the communication and coordination platform for the Farm to Plate Network — allowing members to log in to find each other or to access meeting notes and report updates. The *Getting to 2020* section provides information about the 25 Goals and presents a series of population-level indicator graphics, which track progress over time.

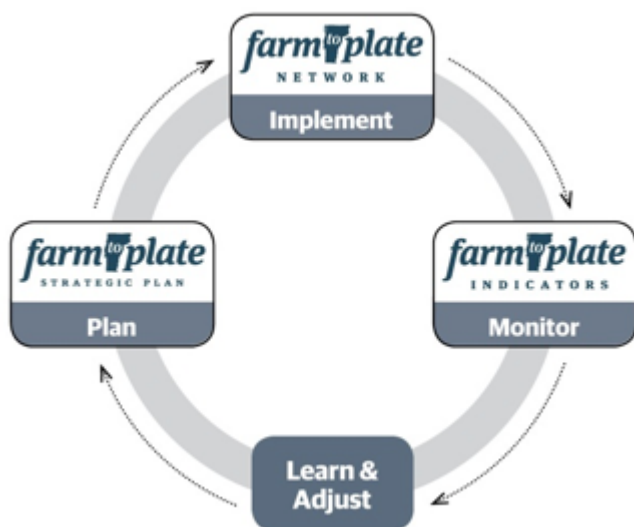


GETTING RESULTS — SHARED MEASUREMENT

Three years after its conception, the Vermont Farm to Plate Network is thriving and is able to report tangible results. As part of ongoing data collection, VSJF produces an [annual report](#).⁵ Over the past five years, approximately 3,600 direct food system jobs have been created. If you add in the number of indirect and induced jobs created, the number rises to almost 9,000, with the most notable gains in food manufacturing, jobs increased from 4,628 to 6,121. The number of food manufacturing businesses grew from 539 in 2009 to 692 in 2013, a 28 percent gain. The annual report also features “blue ribbon” success stories that illustrate the kinds of benefits created by the Network.

Other impressive results to date include:

- The annual growth rate in state output for food related industries increased three percent each year while the over state economy increased one percent each year, between 2007–2012.
- Direct sales (farmers markets, farm stands, and CSA shares) account for 3.53 percent of all farm sales, which ranks sixth in the nation.
- The historic decrease of land in agriculture has apparently halted. Land in agriculture in Vermont now equals 1.25 million acres, the most since 1997.
- There now are 7,338 farms — the most since 1964.
- The Vermont food system multiplier is now 2.28, meaning that for every new food system job, an additional 1.28 jobs are created.



In addition, the Network itself has churned out a lot of important reports and case studies which serve a market research function for farm and food enterprises who otherwise would not have access to this information, including:

- Seven [case studies](#) of renewable energy and efficiency projects on dairy farms.
- Four [case studies](#) on complex, alternative financing obtained by growing food enterprises.
- Multiple [profiles](#) of interesting food-related jobs, geared to inform high school students about their options.
- Five agricultural [land use planning modules](#).
- An [assessment](#) of the opportunity for farm and food enterprises to sell into independently owned grocery outlets.
- [Research](#) into the education and workforce skill needs of food system employers interested in adding jobs in the next few years.

The feedback loops established within the Network provides continuous improvement. The Atlas includes an extensive goal-tracking system using the results-based accountability framework. VSJF tracks both population-level indicators (e.g., food insecurity rates, land in agriculture) as well as performance measures — what the Network groups and other organizations are doing to “turn the curve” on the population level indicators. Campbell notes “Network processes are very evaluative in nature; chairs use an annual inquiry process to trace how their group learns and evolves, and transfers learning to other parts of the food system.”

VSJF has also worked with University of Vermont to conduct a F2P Network survey to gauge how organizations are gaining value from participation, which goals they are working on, and other evaluative questions. A 2014 survey revealed that about 75 percent of Network members said that the Network is helping advance their own organization’s goals, 75 percent said that they are building new relationships because of their Network involvement, and nearly 80 percent said their existing relationships have been made stronger though participation in the Network.

LESSONS LEARNED

THE ROLE OF THE BACKBONE ORGANIZATION

Having a backbone organization to help support coordination, ensure communication, track progress, and provide administrative support is a key component to achieving collective impact.⁶ As the backbone organization for the F2P Network, VSJF helps to guide the overall vision and strategy, mobilize funding, provide professional development and training opportunities, coordinate community outreach, and support aligned activities across the network.

It can be challenging to convince stakeholders (and funders) of the overall value of the backbone organization. To some, it seems that funding a coordination role comes at the expense of on-the-ground projects. However, to date VSJF has been fortunate to have some of its needed operating funds (\$100,000 each year so far) provided by the State of Vermont. Several foundation partners also understand the value of a network approach to systems change and thus provide funding support for important backbone functions.

Kahler also notes that as the backbone organization, key ingredients are patience, consistency and creating a strong culture of shared leadership and shared accountability. “The things we explained three years ago about how the Network will work, how projects will get developed and implemented, how decisions will get made were ‘heard’ but not widely ‘understood’ until now. Just because you explain it once does not mean it will be understood the first, second or third time someone hears it. You have to ‘hold the space,’ be consistent, and be patient- you have to repeat yourself a lot! Members need to experience being in the Network first to better understand why we need this network approach.” VSJF continuously works to train members about how to engage as part of a network and has worked closely with the [Interaction Institute for Social Change](#) to provide training. They’ve also made the collective impact series by Kania and Kramer required reading for all network members. (see box on page two)

GROW THE PIE

VSJF staff spends a lot of time explaining that the goal is not just to reallocate the resources available for sustainable food system work, but rather to actually grow the overall pot of resources. For instance, a year after the F2P Strategic Plan was released, the Vermont legislature created the Working Lands Enterprise Fund to provide competitive grants to working lands (food and forest) enterprises and technical

assistance providers who work directly with enterprises. The F2P Strategic Plan is used as a foundational guiding document to help the Working Lands Enterprise Board make strategic investment decisions. Administered by the VT Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets, the WLEF has made 74 grants of over \$2.1 million over the past two years.

In addition, a group of foundations who were funding food system-related activities got together and formed the Vermont Food Funders Network in 2008 to better leverage each other’s grant making activity. Together, they track how much they are awarding in grants and program related investments. Between 2006-2013 they have collectively invested \$28,094,563 in Vermont’s food system.⁷ They also use the F2P Strategic Plan to help guide funding decisions.

Finally, as part of growing opportunities for Vermont businesses, VSJF is also deeply engaged in work to support food systems change throughout New England. Vermont actively participates in the Food Solutions New England network, which is working toward a goal of 50 percent of the food consumed in New England either being grown, raised or caught within the six state region, by 2060.

BUILD FROM YOUR ASSETS

VSJF is tasked with supporting green economic development in Vermont. In addition to supporting other green sectors like renewable energy, compost, and sustainable forest products, VSJF views its food system efforts as an opportunity to build on Vermont’s strong agricultural tradition. Food production and distribution is a sector with clear growth opportunities for the state.

The goals of F2P are also closely aligned and connected with other efforts to support Vermont’s unique assets. For example, F2P’s work to support agricultural production in the state dovetails with statewide efforts to preserve the working landscape and the rural character of state. The VSJF executive director, by statute, is a member of the Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Board.



BE WILLING TO ADJUST AND MODIFY

One strength of a Network is that it can evolve, change, and adapt over time. The F2P Network, for example, expects that some working groups will complete their work and may cease to exist, while other groups may be created to meet new and emerging challenges. In 2014, two Network Working Groups decided to merge, so a process for merging was developed by the steering committee. A few task forces have been retired as their work has been completed, while other ones have emerged to take on newly defined projects. Very little about the structure of the Network is static. Even VSJF can be replaced as the backbone organization by vote of the steering committee.

An example of this fluidity can be seen in what happened over a three year period with the **Meat Processing Task Force**, the first to get started within the Network. During the F2P planning process, bottlenecks in the meat processing supply chain were limiting the supply of locally-raised meat reaching the marketplace to meet growing consumer demand. “A group of key stakeholder organizations got together to find ways to support and strengthen meat processing businesses in the state,” recalls Ela Chapin, a member of the task force and co-Chair of the **Production & Processing Working Group**. This group helped jump-start the creation of a meat cutters apprenticeship program, targeted grant funds were made available by the Agency of Agriculture and private foundations, specific business assistance was provided to industry members, learning journeys were organized and industry experts were brought to Vermont. In addition, educational tours of processors’ facilities were organized followed by socializing over barbecue among livestock farmers, meat processors, distributors and chefs who really got to know more about what each other needed financially in order to be successful. According to Chapin, “in large part due to the relationship building and collaboration that emerged within the industry, coupled with the market intelligence that was widely shared, significant new meat processing capacity has been added statewide and existing operators are more financially viable.” In 2014, the task force disbanded because their work for now has been completed. Many task force members have switched gears and are actively working to increase the supply of livestock in the state, now that the slaughter and processing capacity issues have been addressed.

Emergence was a key theme of the 2013 Network gathering. Kahler explains, “Networks are meant to change...in a high functioning network, new ideas will emerge and become visible. You can’t see what needs to be addressed until you

are ready to see it. That’s the nature of emergence. One thing leads to the next, often in unpredictable ways — you have to be attentive to the change happening around you to see it and know what to do next.”

This case study was written by Debra Perry of the Institute for Sustainable Communities.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

www.vtfoodatlas.com

Erica Campbell, F2P Network Coordinator

REFERENCES

1. Strolling of the Heifers: www.strollingoftheheifers.com/locavore-index-2013
2. The Plan was originally published in January 2011 and has since been updated in July 2011 and July 2013. The Plan is available online at www.vtfoodatlas.com/plan
3. The F2P Network utilizes Results Based Accountability. For more information, see www.raguide.org/index.shtml
4. **Fluidity of the Network:** When launched in 2011, the Network had six Working Groups. Because the Dairy Industry represents over 65 percent of all agricultural sales in the state and is a mature industry, the original decision was made that dairy should have its own dedicated working group. However, by late 2013, it had become apparent to all that because of its size and breadth, the dairy industry touches all aspects of the food system in one form or another. Thus a proposal emerged between the **Dairy Development** and the **Technical Assistance for Producers and Processors** working groups (since many technical assistance service providers who work with dairy farms participate in this WG) that soon led to the merger of these two in a newly named **Production & Processing Working Group**. The chairs of the two original WGs became co-chairs of the newly formed one.
5. www.vtfoodatlas.com/uploads/2013_F2P_Annual%20Report_1_13_14_LowRes.pdf
6. www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/understanding_the_value_of_backbone_organizations_in_collective_impact_1
7. Note: while this number may not seem large by other states’ standards, especially in states like California or Washington, Vermont has a total population of 625,000 and its foundations are relatively small by comparison. This figure does not include funding that may have come into the state from federal or other grant sources.

To view other case studies by ISC please visit:

www.sustainablecommunitiesleadershipacademy.org