



A viable option: **COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS**

Community food systems support regional and periurban producers...

Servicing specific food preferences, areas or social groups, community food systems are social enterprises that can support regional food producers and local economies.

They are often membership owned and many adopt a business model of operation, usually not-for-profit where they are community enterprises and for-profit where they are small businesses. As small businesses, they are often locally owned.

Because community food systems have social goals rather than only profit-making, they are a type of 'social enterprise'. That is, they adopt a business model to satisfy social goals.

Community food systems have a long history in Australia, with some models dating back to the early 1970s.

They are made up of a diverse range of community-based initiatives:

- **small business** — farmers' markets; home delivery services (often catering to specialised food needs such as organic eaters); greengrocers; specialist retail (such as owner-operated organic food stores)
- **community enterprise** — Community Supported Agriculture (CSA); food co-operatives; community buying groups
- **do-it-yourself** — food production in home and community gardens.

This paper makes six points about community food systems:

- they build the individual capacity of participants and the organisational capacity of their associations
- they supplement conventional businesses in the distribution of food
- they have the capacity to support farmers of the periurban region
- they encourage self-responsibility among participating individuals and families and educate participants about food systems
- they assist individuals and families reduce the environmental impact through their food choices
- they contribute to the development of resilient cities.



1. Developing capacity

Community food systems contribute to the development of individual and organisational skills and capacity through their need for planning, problem solving and management.

Developing abilities in planning, managing money, decision making, resolving disagreement and facilitation are some of the necessities of successful operation.

Evidence for the development of these skills comes from the successful operation of member-owned and managed food co-operatives and community food gardens.

2. Community food systems supplement conventional models of food production and distribution.

Community enterprises and related small businesses set up to cater for particular food preferences are established to service niches in the food production, distribution and value chain. These niches can be too specialised or too limited for big business to cater to.

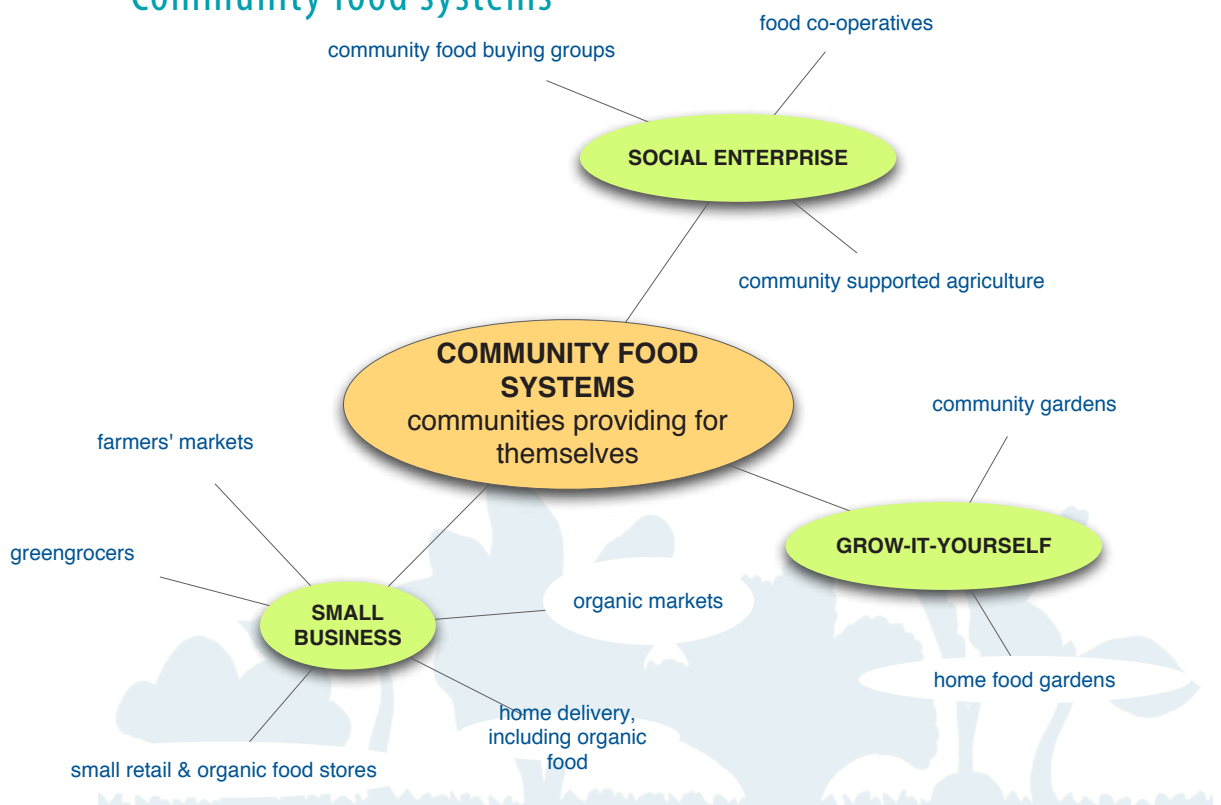
Community food systems might provide particular types of food and related products not supplied by supermarkets and other retailers, such as organic foods and those eaten by particular ethnic groups.

3. Viable markets for regional producers

Community food systems can provide viable markets for regional farmers by developing distribution and marketing systems that make direct links between periurban and regional farmers and urban eaters.

This was a finding of research carried out in the late 1990s by the Victorian Department of Primary Industry in its assessment of the economic viability of the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model, and it is the reported experience of the farmers' market model and of Brisbane's Food Connect, which links regional farmers with city eaters.

Community food systems



4. Encouraging self-help and initiative

Community food systems can encourage self-help and self-responsibility in supplying an individual's or family food supply. This increases the resiliency of participating individuals and families.

Participants suggests an interest in food, food systems and food quality, and education in these, to be outcomes.

5. Reduced environmental impact

Participants in community food systems that source much of their produce from periurban and regional farmers can reduce their environmental impact and consumption of resources.

The 2008 Melbourne University report, *Sustainable and Secure Food Systems for Victoria*, disclosed that food choices account for:

- 50 percent of Australian household water consumption
- 28 percent of their greenhouse gas emissions
- and that 47 percent of our municipal waste going to landfill is organic — food and green waste.

The choice of food from the periurban fringe and the wider region:

- enable urban eaters to reduce their contribution to climate change through eating foods that contain less embodied transportation energy with its consequent emission of greenhouse gases
- provide urban eaters with fresher food;



the nutritional value of perishable foods is related to the time elapsed between harvest and consumption.

(above) Farmers' markets have grown substantially in number over the past decade. Authentic farmers' markets provide a direct link between regional growers and urban eaters.

(below) Urban fringe market gardens and the few remaining market gardens in the suburbs continue to feed Sydney with much of its fresh, perishable produce.

They provide an introduction to Australian working life for many immigrants and are the backbone of a substantial urban food industry employing something like 12,000 people.



6. Contributing to resilient cities

Community food systems that derive much of their product from periurban and regional farmers and food processors contribute to the resiliency of cities and their immediate agricultural hinterland.

Resiliency can be defined as the capacity to resist and adapt constructively to forces impacting on regions from outside. These might include drought, changing climatic conditions, fluctuations in the global economy, natural disaster, disruption to oil and fuel supplies, dramatic increases in fuel prices, bioterrorism or international crises.

Community food systems that trade in regional, fresh and processed primary produce increase the resiliency of cities and regions by contributing to and strengthening regional and local economies, particularly those where participating periurban farmers are located.

Money spent in a region through the purchase of local products and services stays around longer and does more beneficial work before leaking out of the region. Community food systems have a clear role in circulating money in this way.

Food Co-operatives are a community initiative that have potential to play a greater part in the viability of regional food systems.

The co-ops are member-owned enterprises that in some cases provide employment.



Food production in community gardens brings both nutritional and social benefit and forms part of the urban food chain.

Needs of a regional food system

State and local government can take initiatives that support a viable regional food system that benefits farmers on the periurban fringe.

Initiatives include:

- implementing a periurban land capability assessment to identify prime agricultural land that can be protected through legislation and zoning; marginal agricultural land might go to urban development or ecological restoration
- adoption of a food label to identify food products grown and processed within the region; identifying the extent of the region would form a part of this
- government and institutional food procurement policy in favour of regional producers.



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