Socio-Ecological Change Research (SECR) Lab
Putting People First

Culture and Disaster Action Network

CADAN

CULTURE

ECONOMIC SYSTEM

HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEM

INFRASTRUCTURE SYSTEM

NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCE SYSTEM

HOUSING SYSTEM

NSF

NOAA

FEMA
HOW DO COMMUNITIES RECOVER?
COVID Connections: Lessons from Adaptations to COVID-19 as Strategies for Building Food System Resilience

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Abstract

To identify elements of crisis response that might hold lessons for resilience beyond the current moment, we studied a central North Carolina food system during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on ethnographic interviews with farmers, employees and volunteers of food access organizations, and COVID-19 pandemic? This question guided our study and was primary on our minds one brisk morning as members of our research team adjusted masks and entered a farmers’ market to recruit for our study and observe pandemic procedures. The market, known for packing in stalls and a lengthy waitlist for vendor space, was visibly transformed. Large signs about masking and social distancing mandates along with hand sanitizers greeted visitors as they entered the market. The individual vendor stalls were distributed
COVID Connections: Lessons from producer, provider, and distributor adaptations to COVID-19 as strategies for building food system resilience

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Main Research Question

What can be learned about fostering resilience and adaptation in local food systems from the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic?
Study Basics

Central Piedmont region of North Carolina

Data collection from July 2020 - February 2021

15 Ethnographic interviews (7 with organizations and 8 with food producers)

Study participants were farmers and organizations involved in producing, feeding, and facilitating food access in the region

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with a set of 26 codes developed in preliminary coding using the qualitative software MAXQDA
Scaled layers of challenges to the food system we studied highlighting those challenges that are known across the U.S., regional to the Southeast, and specific to COVID-19.
Primary Findings

1. Greater communication over shared needs and interests helped most study participants during intense uncertainty and the absence of clear information.

2. Communication networks were key step to strengthening food systems during crisis and typical operations.

3. Flexibility in roles at the local government level facilitated strengthened food availability and employment continuity locally.
Primary Findings Contd.

4. Disruptions in labor and access to new pools of employees and volunteers was often positive for business and organizational innovation; this needs more research given that frequent turn-over of employees and volunteers is also a noted setback because of disruptions, training, and loss of knowledge and competence.

5. Food banks and pantries reported increased participation from Latino/a communities universally, suggesting that many from previously underserved communities are connecting with resources because they did not feel comfortable accessing or were unaware of them.”
INNOVATIONS THAT WORKED

- Grant Matching Program
- Updated Food Offerings
- Eliminated Police Traffic
- Provided Language Interpreters
- Streamlined Pick Up Options

Deep roots in the community helped food access organizations be successful.

CHALLENGES

- Volunteer Onboarding
  Long-term volunteers were mainly older retirees prior to the pandemic.
  College and graduate students were more willing to work as the pandemic progressed over the past two years.

- Decentralized
  Pop-up programs were temporary and uncooperative.

- Need for
  Greater federal oversight, funding, and programming.

Public charge policy may have impacted usage of food assistance organizations.
LESSONS FOR FARMERS

CULTIVATING Food Systems Resilience

INFLUENCES TO SUCCESS

- Social Connections
- Employee Reliability
- Flexibility and Experience
- Age and Location
- Technology Pre-Pandemic
- Local Economy

CHALLENGES

- REASONS BEHIND INCREASED DEMAND
  - Restaurant sale losses
  - Market closures
  - Contactless purchasing

- HESITANCY TO ADOPT TECHNOLOGY
  Preferred to upgrade technology once pandemic pressure eased

Web-based technology varied from weekly emails to well-designed web-

For more information, visit ...
Further research and the expanded training of employees in contingency planning as a mitigation strategy for local communities.

Research that explicitly engages the topics of Latinx food security and hunger in the US are urgently needed to redress food justice, nutrition, and systemic exclusion and racism especially in the Southeast and focused on non-governmental resource use.
With Gratitude to...

Our Research Participants

Our Funders

UNC Institute for Arts and Humanities
New Faculty Research Grant

UNC College of Arts and Sciences

UNC Department of City and Regional Planning

Questions & Comments?
Reach out at caela@email.unc.edu