

# Food-and-Farm Philanthropy Locally and Nationally: Ready to Take Bold Steps to Effect Big Change

Debra E. Blum 24 May 2010

The story of People's Grocery, a nonprofit group dedicated to bringing fresh food to the underserved neighborhood of West Oakland, California, mirrors the narrative of a growing national movement to create a healthier and more sustainable food system. People's Grocery was one of many grassroots organizations to spring up in the last decade, starting urban gardens, opening farmers' markets and educating people about healthy food choices. As those efforts were gaining footholds in communities around the country, broad issues of health, the environment and the economy as they relate to what Americans produce and eat bubbled to the surface of national consciousness and media attention.

Now, with the White House, the press, government agencies, foundations, politicians, community activists and regular folks everywhere watching, small-scale efforts like People's Grocery are seizing the moment. For its part,

People's Grocery has spun off a for-profit business, with plans to open a full-service grocery store in 2011. The store and the nonprofit will work in tandem to accomplish a single mission: building a local food system that improves the health and economy of the West Oakland community. "We've grown a bit and we've learned a lot, and now it's time to make a bigger impact," says Brahm Ahmadi, founder of People's Grocery who in January 2010 became CEO of the new People's Community Market. "It's not enough to just work around the edges."

Such scaling up is to be the hallmark of the field's maturation in the next few years, according to dozens of people close to food and farming work. And, they say, philanthropy has a critical role in moving those changes along.

## **The Role of Foundations: Looking at the Big Picture**

Foundations, they say, ought to nurture new players and new ideas in the field—such as groups examining food systems through the lens of immigration and labor concerns—and they should continue to support the basics, like farmland preservation and programs that promote farming and help connect producers to consumers. They also should continue to capitalize on the growing interest in connecting health, community development, environmental stewardship and a host of other issues with food and farming. And they ought to

redouble efforts to bring more and more diverse leaders into the field.

But the emerging and critical role for foundations at this time, say many grant makers and grantees alike, is to fund the many and diverse efforts intended to bring food-system and farming changes to scale. That means supporting vast infrastructure needs and social enterprise businesses; supporting advocacy work to inform and change laws and policies on the federal, state and local levels; and supporting collaborative efforts that go inside and outside philanthropy to marshal dollars, know-how and political will.

Underlying the foundation world's budding sense of where best to direct their efforts is a growing understanding in the field of the bigger picture. More people, for example, are talking about regional food systems, not just local food. The idea of examining issues of economics and social justice along the entire food chain, not just at the consumer end, is gaining ground. Grassroots groups are adding farm-to-school or farm-to-hospital efforts to programs that have typically served only individuals and households. A growing chorus of individuals—such as urban gardeners seeking more access to land and water—are recognizing how policies and politics impact their work. Funders are reaching across disciplines and geographic boundaries on issues related to food where they have never done so before.

And some of the biggest philanthropic players in the field, such as the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, in Battle Creek, Michigan, are cementing the case that food and agriculture issues are at the heart of arguably today's most expansive national priority: health. "This is an idea whose time has come," says Kellogg's Gail C. Christopher. "We can't be a healthy democracy unless we have a healthy people." But cashing in on this "it" moment has challenges—not the least of them the economy. "The economic downturn took the wind out of the sails and curtailed what could have been changes happening gangbusters," says Gregory R. Horner, program officer at the Cedar Tree Foundation in Boston.

Policy makers who may have had healthy-food access on their agendas, for example, were likely distracted by other priorities over the past few years. Foundations, with endowments hard hit by the recession, may have had to postpone or shrink their grant making.

But even if government coffers and foundation assets were as healthy as ever, funders—and everybody in the field—face other, significant challenges in achieving large-scale change. Conventional food and agriculture are huge, multi-billion-dollar businesses not necessarily interested in adapting to new ideas, and national politics around food and farming are complicated and entrenched.

Advocates for change are also worried that attention spans may be short among the American people and,

more specifically, the funding community. “Funders need to recognize that this is a moment in time, but it can easily pass,” says John Fisk, director of the Wallace Center at Winrock International, which runs the National Good Food Network. “The nation could be distracted. It’s a little perilous.” His answer: Build capacity among nonprofits, help improve their networks of support and shared resources, and solidify their links with work being done outside the traditional food and farming arenas. Then, he says, if what he calls “this week’s flavor” in philanthropy shifts away from food-systems work, players in the field will still have some solid footing.

## **What's Happening in the Field?**

For now, at least, foundation involvement in the field appears secure and growing. Sustainable Agriculture & Food Systems Funders, a grant makers’ affinity group, grew by 11 members last year to a total of 50, and at least a half-dozen more membership applications are pending. One of the country’s richest foundations, California’s David and Lucile Packard Foundation, entered the field in 2008, with a \$75 million commitment over five years to promote farming strategies that cut carbon emissions and nitrogen pollution. Two other of America’s biggest funders, the McKnight Foundation in Minneapolis and the Walton Family Foundation in Bentonville, Arkansas, each started sustainable-agriculture funding for the first time in the last year, too.

Other grant makers are expanding and accentuating their giving programs in food and farming.

Kellogg last year reworked its program, now called Food & Community, announcing a three-year, \$32.5 million effort to increase access to healthy food and physical activity for vulnerable children and their families.

The John Merck Fund, in Boston, dropped a couple of program areas in 2009 to make room for a new program, Rural New England, centered on food systems, farm preservation and farmer support. The program's 2010 budget of \$1.5 million is triple what it was in 2009.

The George Gund Foundation, in Cleveland, has long supported efforts related to food or sustainable agriculture, but, like many funders, until recently it hadn't put a label on it. Now, says senior program officer John Mitterholzer, Gund is "very intentional about how to fund local food." Part of the foundation's plan is to fund policy work. Last year, Gund made its first-ever grant to support advocacy, giving \$65,000 to a group pushing for, among other measures, a new rule that would require the City of Cleveland to spend at least 10 percent of its food budget on locally sourced items. The group was also behind a new city ordinance that allows residents to seek zoning for community gardens. The next issue for the advocates: water access for the gardens. Mitterholzer calls the policy work a "natural extension" of Gund's interest in local food. How can a funder support urban agriculture, he asks,

without supporting the policies that make it a viable enterprise?

## **Tackling Legislation**

A growing number of grant makers branching into advocacy work on food- and farming-related issues are asking similar questions about rules and laws relevant to every aspect of the food chain, from federal pollution controls to state food-stamp regulations to school-lunch procurement policies. Although private foundations are barred by law from supporting direct lobbying, there are countless legal and useful ways to support advocacy, education and public-policy work.

At the top of the food-policy pyramid is the massive federal farm bill, the every-five-year legislation that essentially sets the country's agriculture and food-spending agendas. And with the bill up for renewal in 2012, more foundations are starting to engage in the national conversation over the legislation.

The Healthy Eating Active Living Convergence Partnership—a collaboration among some of America's top health funders, including the California Endowment and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation—is starting now to turn to farm-bill activity, with a big advocacy win already in its pocket. Last year, the group supported three organizations—the Food Trust, the Reinvestment Fund and PolicyLink—that had pressed the White House hard to

put money in its 2011 federal budget proposal for a financing plan to build grocery stores and farmers' markets in underserved communities. The proposed budget, released in January, calls for \$400 million to go to such an initiative.

The financing plan would create a national version of a Pennsylvania state financing model, and would demonstrate philanthropy's role both in taking successful food-related programs to scale and influencing vital public policy measures. The victory would also demonstrate what funders can accomplish when they combine their resources and talent. The Convergence Partnership, which pools annual contributions from its members of \$50,000 to \$2 million each, is using its coffers and the influence of its heavy hitters to incubate other groups at the regional level.

## **Growth and Evolution in Collaboratives**

Funder collaboratives have been emerging across the country organically, too. The Vermont Food Funders Network got its start in 2008; the Delaware Valley Grantmakers' Food Funders Affinity Group in the fall of 2009. The Appalachia Funders Network, focusing on issues of food and sustainable agriculture as the region transitions away from its economic reliance on tobacco and coal, held its first meeting in March 2010. The Maine Community Foundation, which has been encouraging food-systems work from among its donor-advised funds



since 2007, is inviting other grant makers in the state to a meeting in spring 2010 to explore creating a collaborative.

At the same time that new groups are coming online, Roots of Change, in California, which started in 2002 as the first foundation collaborative to focus on food, is evolving beyond its grant-making role. The group is in the midst of a five-year, \$11.4 million fund-raising campaign from among its members, but in the meantime it has also started providing technical assistance to nonprofits seeking grants from others, and it has branched out to communicate its message of food-systems change to an audience beyond the foundation world. Among its efforts: a campaign for Facebook users and others to sign a declaration enunciating the principles of a healthy food and agriculture policy.

The Partnership for a Healthier America, launched in February 2010 by a group of foundations in response to First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move campaign, intends to reach beyond philanthropy, too, bringing together businesses and nonprofits to jointly come up with solutions to the country's obesity epidemic. The founding partners—among them the Kellogg and Robert Wood Johnson foundations—said they were able to move quickly and seamlessly to organize the new group because many of them were already working together in the Convergence Partnership and they had already made contacts in the White House and with food-related corporations.

More and more foundations are recognizing the importance of setting the table for change by bringing together different players—activists, policy makers, businesses—to create platforms for coordinated action. To that end, more grant makers are also supporting food policy councils — with money, their participation or both. Such councils, which are popping up at a growing clip in towns around the country, come in many forms, but one key role they typically play is as a bridge among and between government agencies and grassroots initiatives.

Another aspect of the food movement that is drawing notice among foundations is the need for new or improved infrastructure—buildings and systems to produce, process and distribute food sustainably, fairly and closer to the consumer. The Gund Foundation is considering ways to put money behind a flash-freezing facility to extend the selling season for local Ohio farmers. Robert Wood Johnson wants to back the construction of supermarkets in underserved neighborhoods. And the Broad Reach Fund, a donor-advised fund in Maine, is looking at ways to support an organic dairy farm that is organized as an L3C, or low-profit limited-liability company, a hybrid business model with designation in a handful of states.

Among the funding collaboratives, Fresh Taste, in Illinois, is particularly interested in supporting business ventures, such as food distributors that would serve local and regional networks of farmers. Investing in such big-ticket

items, which also include things like slaughterhouses and processing plants, may take some creativity among funders, and many of them are starting to consider alternatives to customary grants, such as program-related investments or even equity investments straight from their assets. They also appear as willing as ever to invest in business ventures—nonprofit, for-profit or any mix—as long as the entities advance the cause.

That kind of thinking helps sum up where the field of food-and-farm philanthropy is right now, according to those close to the action: ready to take bold steps to effect big change. Grant makers are tying together critical issues, working collaboratively beyond traditional borders, lining up behind wide-ranging infrastructure projects, and paying attention to underlying policy issues. At the same time, advocates, nonprofit officials and socially minded entrepreneurs are working hard to seize the moment of interest and investment in the field. Says Brahm Ahmadi at People's Community Market: "We're ready to achieve scale."

**Debra E. Blum is a Philadelphia-area freelance writer. She is a regular contributor to *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* and author of a 2007 *Chronicle* feature on emerging trends in food funding. As a reporter and editor, she has closely covered issues related to the nonprofit world, higher education and college sports.**