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Nourishing Regional Food Systems with PRIs

Sustainable food enterprises are attracting attention from a broad audience – consumers, producers, farmers, funders, policy makers, and others. In front of a packed audience, Keecha Harris led a session on exploring strategies to support sustainable food systems, including presentations by Jasmine Hall Ratliff and Tim Crosby.¹ Following the panel presentation, session participants did a site visit to Charlie's Produce.

Panel Presentations

Keecha Harris highlighted the relationships between food, hunger, and farming while underscoring the imperative of culturally competent, socially equitable food systems. She described a conceptual model of regional food systems that increases access, affordability, and quality as well as an "Everybody Eats" community based food system that begins with small farms and ends with fresh food and stronger communities.

For regional food systems to strengthen social and economic justice, Keecha explored how sustainable, inclusive communities can become prosperous and healthy by creating an environment including walkable communities, safe routes to school, safe places to play, local farms, local distribution, local fresh food vendors, access to fresh school food, and access to fresh community food. "Social justice matters. The way you go about supporting community food systems is pivotal," Keecha explained. Opportunities exist to scale up healthy food systems through capacity and infrastructure improvement, increased financing for healthy food-related businesses, equitable leadership development opportunities, and quantifying social impact benefits. As Keecha says, "This is a wonderful way to build a community, one step at a time."

Jasmine Hall Ratliff outlined a framework for preventing childhood obesity through impact capital investment. She described the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's goal of reversing the childhood obesity epidemic by 2015, with special emphasis on reaching children most at risk or having limited access to healthy foods and safe places to play, including children who are Black, Latino, American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander, or living in lower-income communities.

Jasmine explained that the impact capital team and the childhood obesity team at the Foundation work together to find "that sweet spot" of making PRI investments. She shared the Foundation's PRI strategy

¹ Presenters' affiliations: Keecha Harris, Keecha Harris and Associates; Jasmine Hall Ratliff, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; Tim Crosby, Sustainable Agriculture & Food Systems Funders; Diane Dempster, Charlie's Produce.

of impact investing through intermediaries active in related programmatic areas, including school and community food, and school and community physical activity, using a combination of pricing, incentives, promotion, and messaging. She explained how grants, PRIs, and financial institutions are driving systems change through a willingness to assume risk and foster opportunities for technical assistance, peer networks, marketing and financing links, and creation of an environment that is supportive of innovation.

Tim Crosby shared a theory of change based on the premise that the best way to preserve farmland is to improve the economics of farming. Given that the food “movement” is an industry, it is critical that the related businesses succeed so that the values related to nourishing regional food economies are sustainable. Tim advocated focusing on “systemic acupuncture points,” including logistical, policy, and financing support for sustainable food and farm businesses who are trying to grow to meet market demands.

Customized solutions are imperative for success, and can include program related investments, grants, loan guarantees, direct investments, debt financing, technical assistance, and personal contacts and relationships. Tim encouraged the session participants to “start small but start something,” including making a blended investment valuing both social and financial returns.

Site Visit: Charlie’s Produce

Following the panel presentations, session participants boarded a bus and drove about twenty minutes to the Seattle headquarters of Charlie’s Produce. Started in 1978, Charlie’s Produce is the largest privately owned produce company in the Pacific Northwest. The company is a B corporation with more than 750 employees in the Seattle area and more than 10,000 employees worldwide. As Diane Dempster, an employee for twenty-three years, explained, “We are really motivated to have all kinds of produce available to consumers all the time.” They carry both organic and conventional produce and require farmers they work with to be certified for food safety practices, preferably with a Good Agricultural Practices certification. Charlie’s Produce works closely with local farmers, including making pre-crop purchase agreements. As Diane describes, “We’re in a committed relationship with these growers,” helping them with financing for food safety, land purchase and preservation, and crop production.

Following the presentation and conversation, session participants donned their coats and were escorted through the large cold storage areas where flats of produce were stacked up, with participants staying out of the way of patient forklift drivers moving produce in preparation for delivery. Session participants were impressed with the company’s values-driven interactions with its employees, farmers, food sellers, and customers.