

Stream 3. Entrepreneurship, Start-Ups and Small Business:
Competitive Session

**The Secret Recipe for Economic Jam: Local Premium Food Systems as
Entrepreneurial Eco-systems for Sustainable Regional Development**

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A Secret Recipe for Economic Jam: Local Premium Food Systems as Entrepreneurial Eco-systems for Sustainable Regional Development

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the opportunity for food and farm entrepreneurs to participate in their regional food systems and considers their potential to contribute to regional sustainability. In many regions premium local food offers an important avenue toward sustainable regional development, however we ask, is there really opportunity for entrepreneurial expression in regional food systems? What are the challenges and opportunities to farming and food entrepreneurship in the face of industrial production of generic consumables? An investigation of the Barossa Valley regional food system revealed community challenges for food and farming entrepreneurs, and delivered some important insights into entrepreneurial leverage, community sustainability and economic jam.

Keywords: entrepreneurship, sustainability, start-ups, innovation, knowledge.

This paper examines the opportunity for food and farm entrepreneurs to participate in their regional food systems (RFS) and considers their potential to contribute to regional sustainability. This is important as globally, food systems are undergoing transitions with many small holdings being consolidated by multi-nationals to facilitate intensive agriculture for the mass production of generic consumables (Tencati & Zsolnai, 2012). Fast food for life in the fast lane; this contemporary lifestyle brings a compromise of wide spread monocultures, intensive farming, standardisation of consumer palates, and the mass manufacturing of food products (Aspen 2002). The advent of global demand for generic standardised produce, together with the highly resourced economies of scale of the industrial producers, means the competition faced by regional boutique farmers and micro producers is fierce. The corollary of this appears to be a tendency towards conservative farming, low-risk high-value marketable crops and food products.

Fortunately, there are unique food system in many regional areas which can deliver local premium produce and boutique food with clear provenance, low food miles and a direct connection to the farms and the communities which produce it. In such regions, local premium food and produce could be an important avenue for economic advantage and an opportunity to achieve sustainable

regional development. Food and farm entrepreneurs value their connection to the land and the unique environmental assets that provide their distinctive resources. Thus, cultivating a thriving local food industry offers a potential avenue to cultivate and protect the integrity of the land, and an opportunity to invest in the local producers and help keep money in the community. As well as affording the opportunity for food or farming entrepreneurs to do food differently from the generic consumables it also contributes to the distinct reputation of the region and to establish a unique food locale. Sustainable regional development requires active business and economic renewal committed to investment in common good local assets and attributes (Tencati & Zsolnai, 2012). Increasing regional well-being through a thriving local food and farming sector has positive spill-overs for the community in terms of employment, esteem, engagement, and economics. This is economic jam; the delicious extra that complements the bread and butter economy of the region. The questions which remains are, is there opportunity for entrepreneurial expression in RFS? What are the challenges and opportunities for farming and food entrepreneurs in regional communities?

Premium food here means food which is locally grown and/or produced within a particular recognised region. It includes premium produce of local provenance (not industrially farmed) and boutique food which is food produced using traditional, boutique, artisan or heritage methods to create products that are locally distinctive, not broadly generic. The premise is that cultivating and promoting regionally distinctive produce and boutique foods presents a unique opportunity to foster an avenue of sustainable economic development for regional communities. The reality is that there are many stakeholders involved in RFS, and they participate in a variety of ways and for a number of reasons, creating a complex system of relationships, ambitions, connections and agendas. This paper considers the diverse food system participants of the Barossa Valley, South Australia (SA), their characteristics, relationships and interactions to determine if where there are opportunities for entrepreneurial expression and to discern what the challenges are to leveraging those toward sustainable RFS.

The goal of this research is to provide an insight into the challenges and opportunities for entrepreneurial expression in regional communities seeking to develop sustainable food systems for their future. Following this introduction, theory supporting this investigation is discussed and then the

research methodology is presented. Drawing from the experiences of producers, farmers, agencies, distributors and policy makers, the nature of relationships and interactions in support of entrepreneurs in a RFS results is subsequently discussed and further, how those relationships and interactions are enabled or constrained by broader structures including social, governance and infrastructure is also considered. Such insights will become a resource for regional communities and farmer/food system entrepreneurs and regional development agencies (such as Regional Development Australia - RDA) as well as further research.

UNDERSTANDING REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS

This research explores the challenges and opportunities for farming and food entrepreneurs to consider how entrepreneurial expression can be a catalyst for regional development and community resilience. A critical analysis approach is adopted here, advancing the investigation beyond conventional supply-demand value chain analysis by recognising and including the diversity of actors, the intricacies of their roles, and the driving agendas in the assessment of the (VAW) of RFS (Brown et al., 2010).

Further differentiating from the usual approach to food studies, this project acknowledges that a common regional knowledge is the platform of its social structures, built through shared experiences and history, mutual understanding and conventions creating the common bonds of a community (Daniel & Rathnappulige, 2011). Based on that perspective when considering new ventures and business development in a RFS, there implicit expectation is that the appropriate local knowledge will be available. Knowing and sharing the ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ of the land, its produce and seasons, as well as suppliers, markets and tradesfolk, is local knowledge of which the connections and sharing has helped regional communities to survive. However, communities age, youth disperse and families relinquish their ties to the land and its unique food resources, the historic knowledge of the ‘ways and means’ of regional food and produce is lost. Understanding the social foundations of community knowledge can help ensure the preservation and renewal of valuable knowledge resources for the future and the ongoing enrichment of regional communities (Rathnappulige & Daniel, 2013). A premise of this research is that regional entrepreneurs are likely to be highly reliant on community and regional knowledge in the development of their ventures.

The establishment of successful sustainable RFS could potentially present a paradigm shift, indeed a successful social innovation, for the well-being and resilience of regional communities. Social innovation is an emerging field dedicated to understanding societal empowerment through bottom-up initiatives that aim to benefit and improve the well-being and welfare of groups and communities in society (Dawson & Daniel, 2010). Social innovations are not driven by commercial/profit motives although Saul (2011) points out that in making lasting solutions to social problems these have to be commercially sustainable. Socially constructive goals, such as developing community co-ops, food hubs and farmers markets can facilitate distribution for local farmers and disparate small producers, in doing so this supports changes that improve the social and economic conditions in regional areas (Daniel & Dawson, 2009). In this way the collective engagement of a regional community could be seen as an informal bottom-up entrepreneurial incubator for niche food and premium produce businesses.

Regional food production is by no means a certain way to success and prosperity. Like other entrepreneurs (Lundmark & Westelius, 2014), actors in the regional food sector face uncertainty and probable setbacks as a result of the challenges of competing with limited scale and scope. To many, the road to a sustainable livelihood through regional food is one of effectuation (building on various opportunities offered) rather than generic business plan deployment (Sarasvathy, 2001). At a local level, like in regional clusters (Klepper, 2011), the existence of other regional food actors and a framework of established value networks can be expected to increase the likelihood of entrepreneurial success. To ideologically motivated actors, the diverse range of motives and achieved business models already established in the RFS may lead to a view of others' choices as misbehaviour when considered from a sustainability perspective, rather than as laudable entrepreneurship toward a sustainable RFS (Lundmark & Westelius, 2012).

The project uniquely brings together the resource-based view of the firm (Peteraf, 1993; Peteraf & Barney, 2003), the dynamic capabilities perspective (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000) and the relational view (Dyer & Singh, 1998) to build our understanding of the challenges and opportunities for regional food entrepreneurs in a sustainability perspective of RFS. The opportunity to assess the

influence of various system elements on relational exchanges and productive synergies with respect to value-adding activities for food and farm entrepreneurs and regional prosperity is unprecedented.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The benefit of using a systems approach to research complex problems such as sustainable food systems is that it provides a holistic method of empirical analysis by engaging diverse and multiple actors in the empirical process. At the heart of a social systems analysis also lies the investigation of the perspectives and motivations of the different stakeholders and of their agendas (Checkland & Scholes, 1990). This research design recognises that the complexity of systems creates inevitable theoretical paradoxes, and so grounding the analysis in an ethnographic study allows juxtaposition of disciplinary perspectives and provides a constructive approach to building theoretical rigor which generates insights for broader contextual relevance (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989).

The VAW approach to considering multiple stakeholder relationships facilitates holistic assessment of participants and relational motivations. The VAW view of regional systems acknowledges a) horizontal actors e.g. local producers as competitors or collaborators involved in the production of goods or services, b) vertical actors e.g. local grocers as the value chain participants providing supply, distribution, inputs, retail and related activities to the producers, and c) lateral actors e.g. government agencies that inform, guide and control the producer and retailer activities (see Brown et al. 2010).

Our approach utilized a qualitative grounded methodology to reveal the complex, diverse and inter-related areas of RFS research, this way it ensures the evidence is strongly linked to the regional context from which it is drawn. The benefit of using a systems approach to research complex problems such as sustainable food systems is that it provides a holistic method of empirical analysis by engaging diverse and multiple actors in the empirical process. This approach delivers rich qualitative interpretation, in such a way that “empirical “reality” is seen as the ongoing interpretation of meaning produced by (the) individuals engaged in a common process” (Suddaby, 2006). This method is thus grounded in the experienced reality of multiple participants in the regional food economy and enables holistic theory development while avoiding preconceived pattern seeking, which may suppress understanding of complex social systems (Moss 2001, Stacey 1995).

A grounded systems approach utilising a multiple participant analysis together with an ethnographic study provided the evidence collection for a sound and encompassing empirical study. Interviews with 25 participants in the Barossa Valley (BV) food system, including producers, farmers, retailers, chefs, agencies, and government were undertaken. Two years of participant-observation in the BV RFS informed the ethnographic study which generated the following findings.

Context

Founded 150 years ago, the BV constitutes a unique region in the social and commercial fabric of SA. The area today keeps intact the marks of a history that has not been forgotten and still constitutes a solid basis for the development of the region and of the individuals that are born, grow or move there and learn the customs and the “law of the land”. Three basic characteristics the BV region possesses that are certainly a point of difference to other regions of Australia:

1. A homogenous cultural “view of the world” - Weltanschauung - and living customs that it's defined and confined in a precise geographical area. This culture descends from the German settlers, the challenges they faced, and the history of Barossa as a “close” environment, its intermarriages, family laws, inheritances policies and dense spectrum of social activities and customs have kept the region unified and together for 150 years.
2. A Regional Truth – a sense of being part of a story that is not history, but is a living connection between their forefathers and settlers that must have a reflection in everyday life, in order to foster a sense of belonging. This truth extends to customs, ideas regarding the world of private and public life, and even ordinary habits such as sport, social and food events.
3. A Paddock to the Plate philosophy that is born from a perfect mirroring of ancestors Weltanschauung and Regional Truth – the ancestors had to adopt a lifestyle that was close to the land in order to survive – to respect and protect it and nurture it at the same time. Exploitation would have resulted in catastrophic consequences on following harvests and breeding cycles, and in a “close” system such as the 19th century BV no external help (food wise) could be provided. Seasonality, biodynamics and lore, are all features that have been rediscovered today in the world of contemporary agriculture, because humanity has become aware of the consequences of industrialised treatment of regionally distinctive horticultural domains. In BV all these values

have not been rediscovered, they simply have never been lost. This is the central point of difference to other regions where generic farming and mass production assumes homogenous treatment of broad scale agriculture.

ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPRESSION IN THE BAROSSA VALLEY FOOD SYSTEM

Following the systemic analysis, the key issues, critical junctures, system conduits and leverage points were itemised and mapped in the casual loop analysis of the BV RFS, see Figure 1. Interview evidence was analysed and interpreted to enable the development of a causal loop map to illustrate the unique nuances, challenges and contextual issues of the food region. This approach illustrates the broader interplay of stakeholders' diverse and dynamic contexts as they continually re-inform and recreate the interactive paradigm of knowledge and understanding within the evolving RFS (or network) as they experience it.

-----Insert Figure 1 HERE -----

It was evident that the socio-economic development in the BV food system proceeds with the concurrence of different actors. For the purposes of this paper these actors can be divided in two categories: 1. Private actors (PR) and 2. Public actors (PU). We define PR as individuals or private enterprises that play an active role in the RFS and are part of the development of everyday economic and social life in BV as far as food growth, processing, distribution and consumption is concerned. They are both horizontal (principle food producers and growers) and vertical actors (food value chain participants - suppliers and distributors) e.g. farmers, organiser of private food/social clubs where premium food consumption is involved, private festival organisers, food educators, food entrepreneurs that also have a complementary food offer, volunteers at events and festivals, and/or members of the hospitality industry. The important issue to note when focusing on the action of PR is that it is part of a bottom up approach to growth and development of the RFS.

We define PU as all the agencies, government bodies and third party organisations, as lateral actors, existing or created to facilitate growth in the food sector (e.g. Barossa Food, Barossa Tourism, local councils, the RDA agency, Primary Industries and Regions SA (PIRSA)). When we consider the activities of PU in the RFS it's significant to note the inevitable top down approach to growth and development. In addition to these stakeholder groups we identified three different types of

interactions between the various participants. These simplistic but powerful distinctions were significant in the implications for entrepreneurial opportunities. They could be identified as:

1. Economic interactions i.e. any food interactions that involve the exchange of money (e.g. restaurants, markets, food tourism, food hospitality, producers selling food, gourmet weekend event)
2. Partial economic or hybrid interactions i.e. any food interactions that had some exchange of money as a precondition for the success of the relationship - but where the social value of the interaction was considered as equally important as the economic side (e.g. harvest festival with all its volunteers)
3. Non-economic interactions i.e. any food related interactions with no exchange of money but where the interaction is valued with respect to its professional, business or social benefits (e.g. professional networks, festival planning, RDA meetings, regional development meetings with PU's, private meetings between food PR's).

On the basis of the stakeholder categories and interaction types above, and the nature of their interactions, it became apparent that the esteem and legitimacy of participants in the system could be understood as two critical characteristics of those involved in the food system. The causal loop map revealed esteem was generated as a result of perceived integrity while legitimacy came about due to recognition as part of the community and is important for building social networks and community engagement. These two characteristics indicated the social contribution or utility of participants and was recognised and cultivated by the perceived effort that they put into developing and improving the BV RFS by the other members of the BV community. In addition, indicators perceived as evidence of their success were recognised as those that generated an explicit economic outcome and constructive social push, in terms of fostering community spirit, inspiring creativity, building a sense of belonging and enhancing the BV reputation on a national and international scale.

The third characteristic of importance for participants' involvement in the BV food system was their professional status associated with their recognised role in the community. Business connections and business support were revealed in the causal loop map as key to business confidence and food business success. Status of a role/person to the members of the community is measured by people's awareness of the person and their role, and the importance attributed to the role in terms of power, legitimacy and ability to generate financial returns, funding or investment for BV. Figure 2

illustrates how utility and status can be used to create two dimensions of relational value in a useful model through which participants in the food system can be evaluated with respect to their relational value and its potential for supporting regional food entrepreneurs in the initiation and development of new ventures. The dimensions reveal significant differences with respect to their ability to support regional food and farmer entrepreneurs as well as other RFS participants.

-----INSERT Figure 2 here-----

Blockers are those food system participants that have a high role/status in the community but low utility. Relative to the perspectives of others participating in the system they are considered to fail at their job and in their ability to satisfy peoples' expectations. They have a significant position that could help them foster growth and development in the food system both socially and economically but for a series of biases, self-interests, or inefficiencies in the role itself or external factors they are unable to deliver and thus hinder the progress. Participants expressed the view that many roles such as those in some government agencies in areas such as building, zoning, regulations and development as well as a number of highly funded but poorly performing third party organisations were not constructive and seemed to block development and progress rather than support it. With respect to the development of the RFS these indicate a waste of a role (wrong role) or a wrong person in a role and thus present a missed opportunity to leverage the high status position. A solution could be to remove the person responsible for being unable to fulfil the role prescribed (top down approach) or if the problem is the role itself (junk organization) one clear solution would be to shut it down or making it more efficient by integrating it in a larger and more successful organization.

Facilitators are those participants that have low status but high contribution and knowledge of what is going on in the BV food system and also have a medium to high utility e.g. legacy farmers, established producers, consultants, journalists, teachers, food business managers. Often their utility is mismatched with their roles so their utility isn't capitalised on for the benefit of other participants in the food system. A solution would be to identify these people and try to coordinate them, potentially creating more constructive roles to leverage their utility. They have enormous potential to support regional entrepreneurs with their vast local knowledge and experience in the system.

Lynchpins are those participants with recognized high status role in the RFS as well as a high utility. These people are accomplished in their role or their businesses and they play a fundamental part in connecting different pieces of the society between themselves. There are different clusters of lynchpins in BV such as hospitality people (high quality and low quality clusters), medium and small producers, community organizations and clubs. Lynchpins are a critical role, but they need to be supported to enable them to meet, interact and inspire other participants in the system. They have a significant role in the future sustainability of the system as they contribute to preparing the ground for those that will be lynchpins after them.

Potential lynchpins are the participants with smaller roles and a utility that corresponds to the role e.g. new businesses, growing regional tourism bodies and associations, successful food and farmer entrepreneurs. In order to have them grow to their full potential and have a new generation of lynchpins that will foster growth development and renewal in the food system, different coordination and interchange actions can be undertaken to cultivate the expertise and utility of this group. The top down approach would be to try and facilitate growth for these actors through creating an environment which facilitates their contribution to the economic development and social endeavours in the food system. The bottom up approach for potential lynchpins is for them to seek more education and to grow themselves in their respective fields, here too there is a role for the government to facilitate emerging leaders and entrepreneurs in the regional food community.

Understanding the relational interplay between the various actors and the overarching economic drivers, environmental pressures and social processes is essential to better understand RFS. What was interesting with respect to entrepreneurial opportunity in this BV case was the interaction types; the non-economic interactions were of more value to entrepreneurs because of their strategic relational value compared to economic interactions which deliver commercial legitimacy and recognition.

“For all the stuff I’ve done in the wine industry, for all my other networks, I’ve never had so much congratulations and acknowledgement than coming second in the chocolate cake competition” (Producer)

Following the identification of the important interaction types for entrepreneurs, the issue was then with whom should they interact to increase the potential value in the relationship. The other challenge revealed through this research is how to facilitate non-economic interactions with high value participants.

“Get a whole group of those people in a room together... and they will have such a sense of relief that they will go “Oh there's someone else like me” and they share experiences and problem solve together” (Agency #1)

Considering the characteristics of status and utility, it would seem ideal for entrepreneurs to make acquaintance with lynchpins, with high status and high utility. While the potential for leverage and support would exist, the issue becomes a question of time; time available for the lynchpin to contribute and time for the relationship to unfold its potential. Alternatively, entrepreneurs may be better placed to engage with a facilitator with low status but high utility, with whom they could engage and evolve through a constructive relationship.

“we’re witnessing too many examples of great food businesses that are being compromised quite a bit because of existing policy and regulation” (Agency #2)

Figure 3 illustrates how hypothetically engaging with a facilitator with high utility may help the relationship evolve such that the participant supporting the entrepreneur may achieve high status on becoming involved with a novel initiative and as time goes on regain their utility along with status to become a lynchpin. Including the temporal element in the assessment of relational value for regional entrepreneurs provides an opportunity to consider future potential rather than simply providing static representations.

-----Insert Figure 3 Here-----

SUMMARY

This research contributes to theory and practice by revealing type of interaction is important for entrepreneurial opportunity and the significance of non-economic interactions for entrepreneurial leverage. In addition, revealing the characteristics of utility and status provides a powerful tool to

assess participants for potential interactions. Further, including the temporal dimension of engagement transforms the assessment to a dynamic model and offers a contribution for future research. Finally, the most significant issue emerging from this BV study was the importance of a diverse and engaged community available to facilitate the evolution of constructive relationships and support the development of novel entrepreneurial initiatives.

The benefits of a growing and evolving premium food system for regional sustainability emerge from the development of a) entrepreneurial ventures promoting unique local produce, boutique foods and artisan methods, b) environmental stewardship of the local agricultural land and techniques as well as the safeguarding of regional agriculture/horticulture knowledge evolved to manage it, and c) community engagement and esteem derived from cultivating a distinctive regional food and produce presence, all ultimately d) promoting novel, sustainable and region-appropriate models of small business development and food entrepreneurship contributing to renewal and growth.

This paper demonstrates how understanding the system of interlinking participants with their complex relationships and diverse influences are integral to the sustainable development of regional food systems. The notion of engaging diverse participants, including those of low status and low utility, into regional development initiatives may seem like a waste of scarce resources, however opportunities for food and farm business entrepreneurship need inspiration. Similarly, constructive bottom up opportunities to facilitate interactions help generate relationships and build motivation contributing to economic renewal and emergence. This is the secret recipe of economic jam; the delicious extra economic return to the community, from the niche and micro premium food and produce businesses, SME's and that contributes more to the bread and butter economy of the region than finance alone. Sustainable regional development contributes to agrarian community well-being and resilience, facilitates novel farming and food production practices, and helps maintain strong regional integrity.

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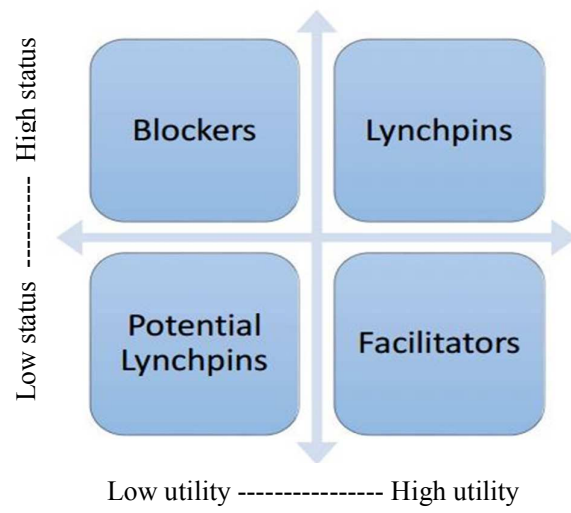


Figure 2. Utility and status as key influences for entrepreneurial expression

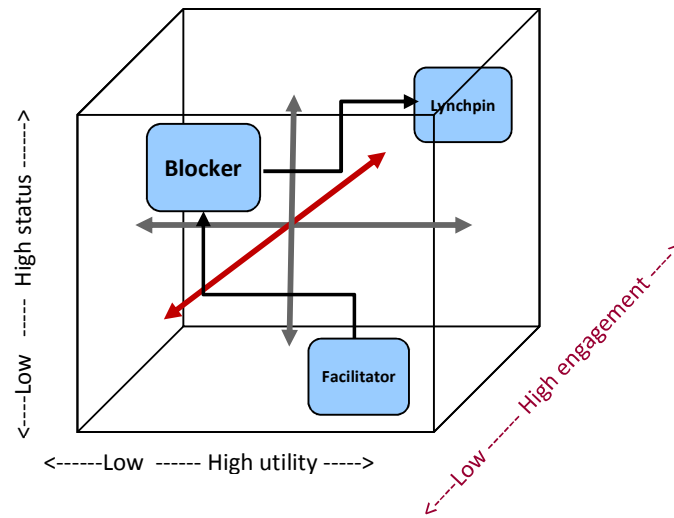


Figure 3. Engagement as a facilitator for entrepreneurial opportunity