

# What Are We Talking about When We Talk about Local and Regional Food Systems?

Presented by Kate Clancy

May 19, 2009

NERCRD Workshop:

Enhancing Local and Regional Food Systems

# Multiple Meanings of “Food Systems”

- Descriptive
  - Scale, type
- Aspirational
  - Local, regional, sustainable
- Research type
  - Reductionist, systems



# Confusion of Global (Any Country) with U.S. (or Region of U.S.)

For example:



Livestock emissions

Food miles



# Regional and Local



- Widespread, interchangeable use of terms
- No agreed-upon definitions
- Intentional choice of one scale or another by projects/companies
- Not always strategic

# Elements Regarding Which Boundary Makes a Difference

1. Demand parameters
2. Farm scale
3. Land use
4. Economies of scale
5. Infrastructure



# 1. Demand Parameters

- Foodshed: “The geographic area from which a population derives its food supply”
- What percentage of diet? What percentage of foods?
- New York state could produce 20% of total need (Peters, Wilkins, and Fick 2006)
- Most New York population centers could source most food and nutrition needs, except NYC (Peters et al., 2009).

# Local Food Theoretical Maximum Percentages for Selected States

CT	DE	MA	MD	ME	NY	PA	VT
9	42	4	28	39	22	40	38

Timmons, Wang, and Lass 2008

## 2. Farm Scale

- Farms-of-the-middle
  - Too big for direct marketing
  - Too small for commodity competition
- Mid-sized farms needed to supply institutions with significant volumes of food
- Match crop with geography and farm size
- Circle City example

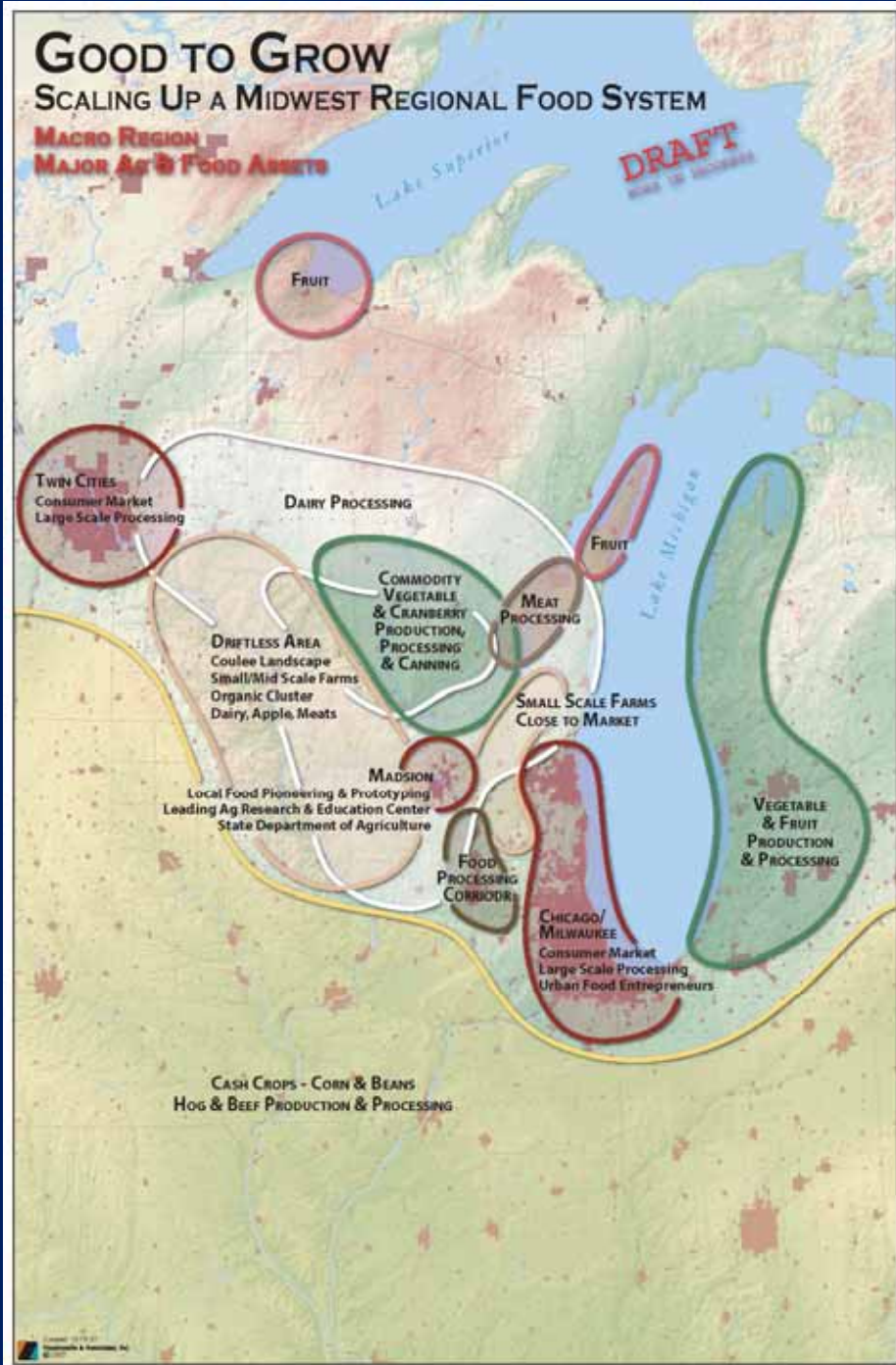


# GOOD TO GROW

## SCALING UP A MIDWEST REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEM

**MACRO REGION**  
**MAJOR AG & FOOD ASSETS**

**DRAFT**  
NOV 10 2010



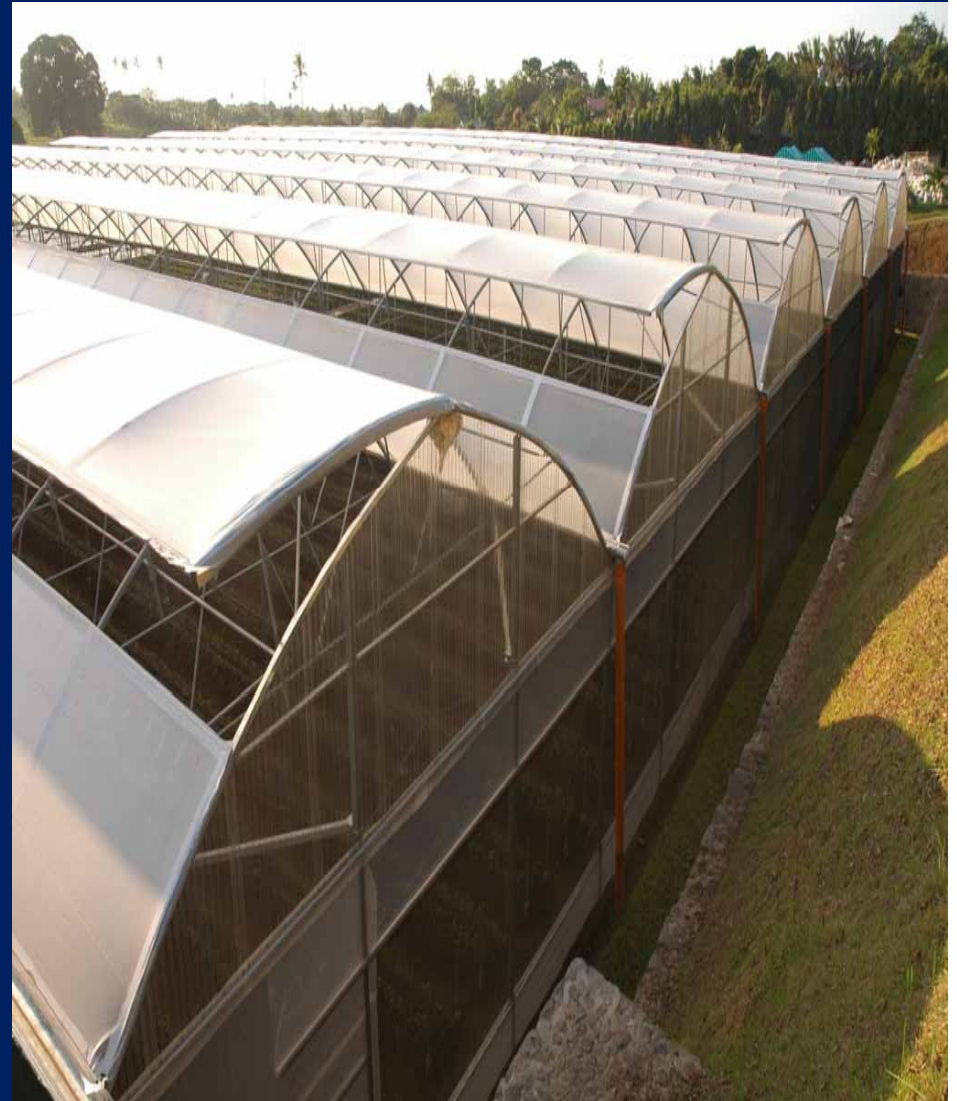
# 3. Land Use



- Too frequently ignored in research and planning
- Local decision-making makes planning vulnerable
- Movement to larger scale political units
- Larger scale needs
  - Wildlife corridors

# 4. Economies of Scale

- “What economies of scale will support an acceptable standard of living... and be sustainable” (McKibben 2007)
- Economies of scale are real
- Economies of scope are one way to approach
- Appropriate scale evolves on many dimensions



# 5. Infrastructure

- Strategic
- Emerges according to needs
- Meets multiple requirements
  - Energy efficiency
  - Capital



# Conflation of Local with Sustainable

- Often assumed they are the same
- In reality, they often are not throughout the chain
- Should they be?

“Organic vs. local is a false dichotomy”  
(Fromartz 2007)

“The food chain as a whole is the ultimate framework for a scrutiny of sustainability” (Cobb et al. 1999 in Ilbery and Maye 2005)

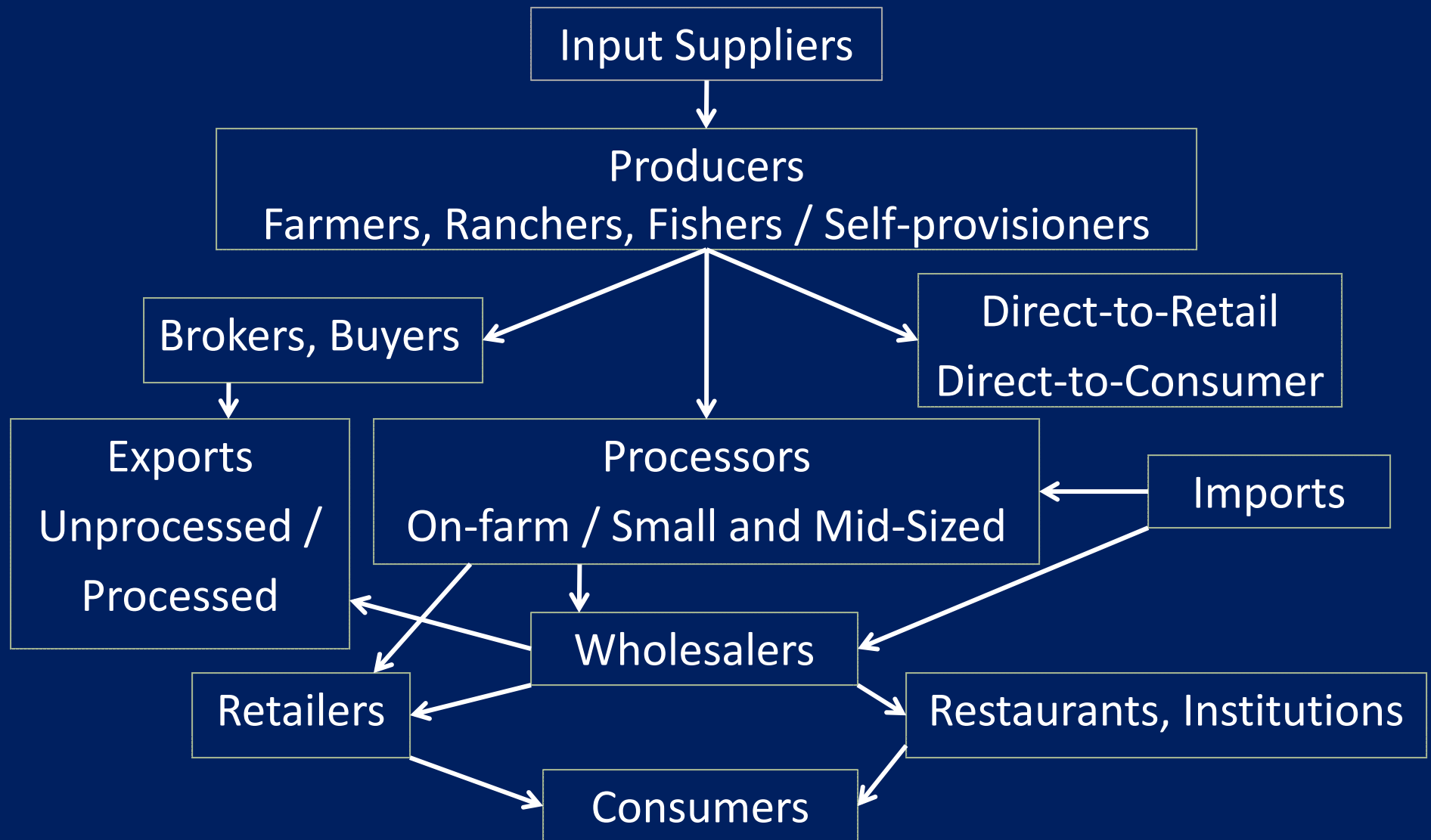
# Conflation of Local with Direct Marketing

Results of study of 15 peri-urban counties (2005–2006): Direct marketing represents 9–47% of all sales (median 17%)

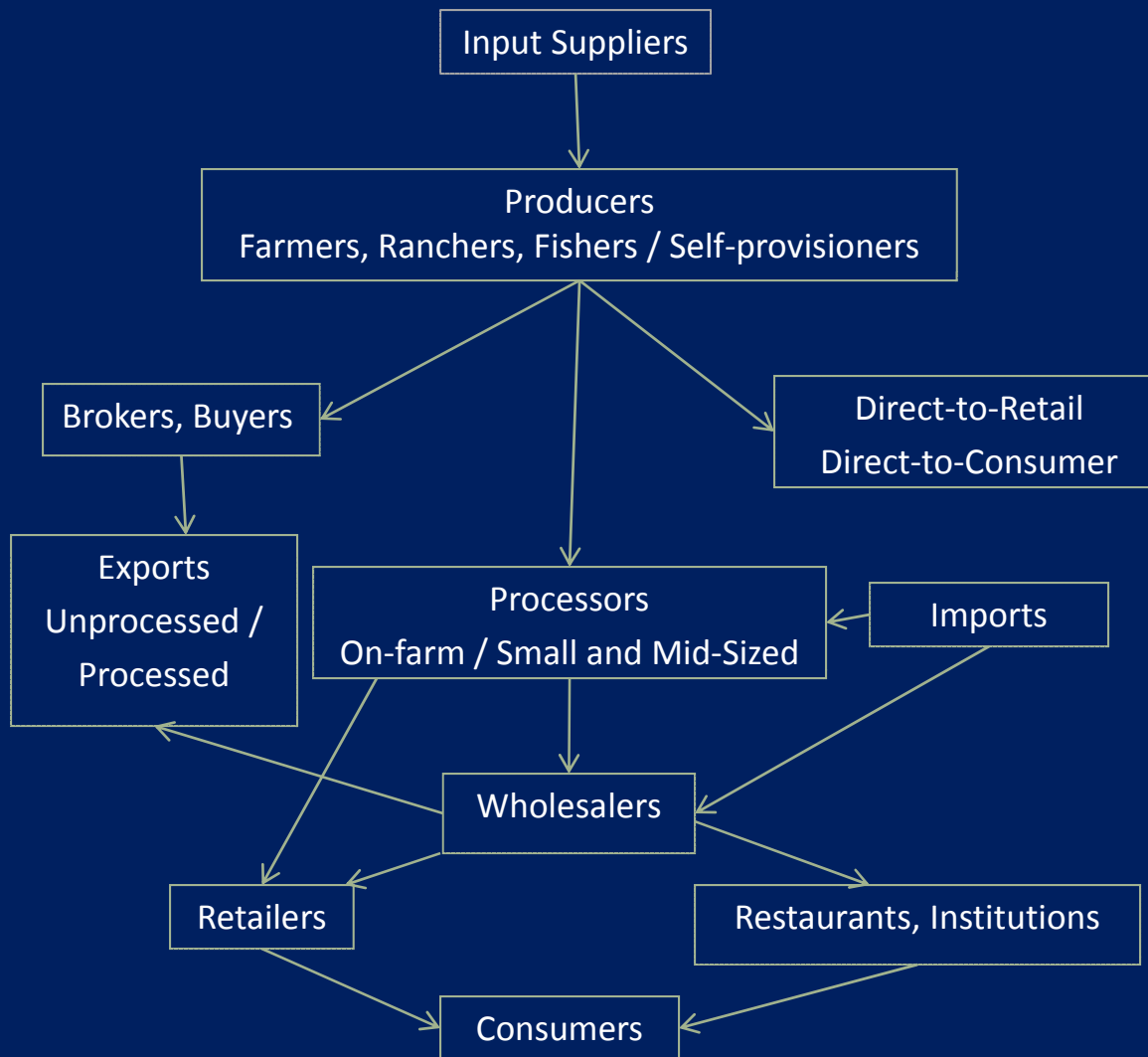
- On-farm: 3–29% of total direct sales (median 8%)
- Direct-to-retail: 0–8% (median 3%)
- Farmers' markets: 0–8% (median 1.5%)
- CSAs: 0–2%

(Esseks et al., *Sustaining Agriculture in Urbanizing Counties: Insights from 15 Coordinated Case Studies*, 2008)

# A Model for a Regional Food System



# A Model for a Regional Food System



## Sustainable Practices

Organic, biodynamic, IPM  
Energy-, water-, soil-saving  
Non-polluting

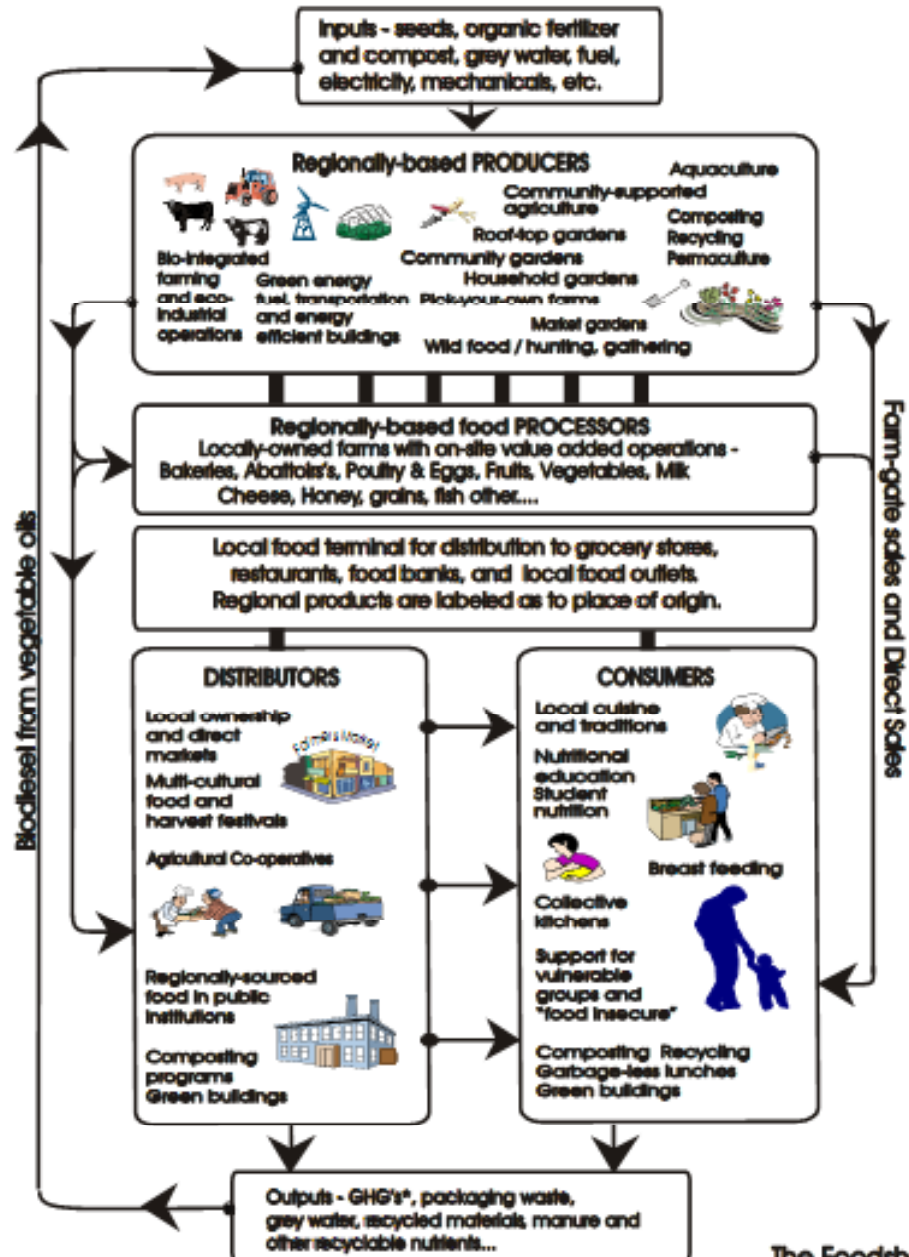
## Value Chains

Trust  
Collaboration  
Fairness  
Linkages  
Standards  
Highly differentiated

## Scale

Regional  
Local  
National  
Global

# What would a sustainable local food system look like?



Food Policy: Environmental, Agricultural land use  
Income Security, Food banks, Food services, Food labelling

\* Greenhouse gas emissions

# Transition Scenarios

- Most food chain diagrams either worse case or ideal
- Transition models/scenarios would be helpful
  - Hybrids (e.g., Ilbery and Maye work)
  - Provide inspiration
  - Lay out strategy



# Systems Research on Food Systems?

"Food systems are a unique form of coupled social-ecological systems" (Ericksen 2008)

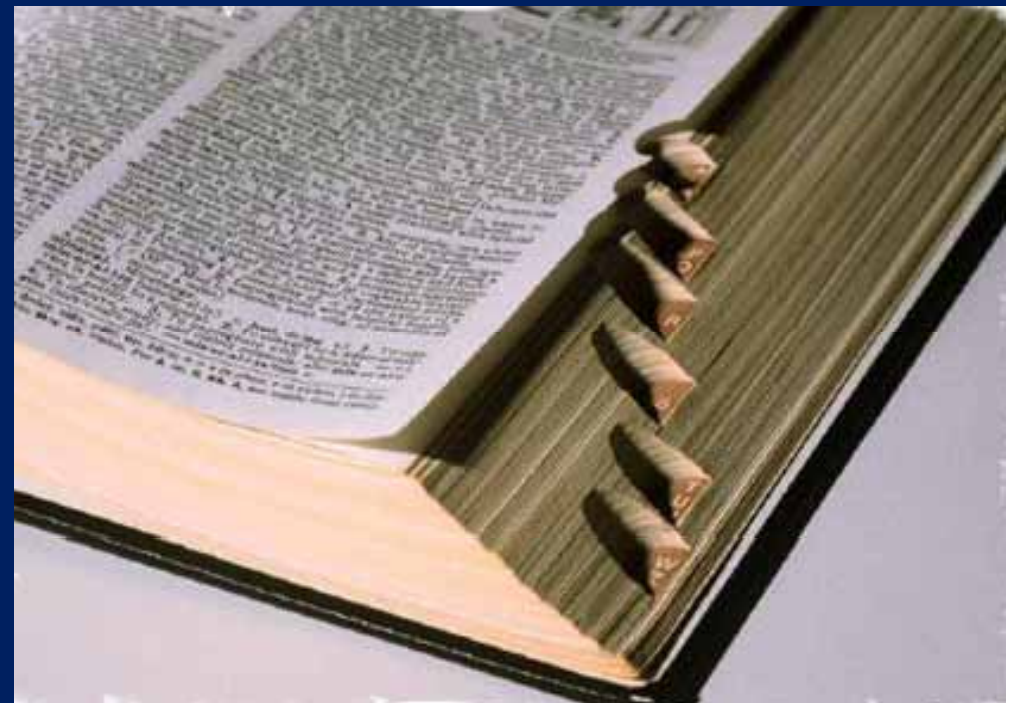
"Far more research papers claim to offer a system-level analysis than do" (Lockeretz and Boehncke 2000)

- Research query: What scale of food system would be most resilient?
- Include climate change, water, and energy in research and projects

# What Would Help?

## Clarity

- Definitions
- Assumptions
- Boundaries
- Theory



# What Would Help? (continued)

## Strategy

- Act at level to solve problem
- Fill gaps
- Reinvent which wheels?
- Strive for resilience

