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Missouri EATs: Cultivating community food systems through community engagement

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Abstract

The University of Missouri Extension Missouri EATs program connects local stakeholders to build and strengthen their community's food system. Missouri EATs (which stands for Engage, Act, and Transform) is a community development program designed to *engage* people to identify local assets and needs; help them develop a plan to *act* on their top priorities; and make lasting changes to *transform* their local food system. The broad goal of Missouri EATs is to create healthy, resilient, and equitable community-based food systems. The starting point is a community-wide in-person or on-line forum for participants to engage in an informed and facilitated discussion about the food system. This event is the first step of a larger community organizing process that engages communities to make positive changes over time. The format allows for broad discussions related to local agriculture, hunger, health, and related topics. It relies heavily on local input from community members in general and those representing of local business and agencies. The forum results in a Food System Action Plan, which is a tool used to keep communities engaged after the event and guide their ongoing effort. Communities may choose to hold a combination of small working group meetings, community meals, or quarterly meetings to keep things moving in a positive direction. Annual meetings are encouraged to provide updates and reengage community members. The forum and subsequent activities may all be adapted for an on-line environment.

Keywords

development, action, planning, conversation, transformation, resilient

Presenter Information

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INTRODUCTION

In partnership with communities across the state, the University of Missouri Extension Missouri EATs program connects local stakeholders to build and strengthen their community's food system. Missouri EATs (which stands for Engage, Act, and Transform) is a community development program designed to *engage* people to identify local assets and needs; help them develop a plan to *act* on their top priorities; and make lasting changes to *transform* their local food system. Missouri EATs is a creation of the MU Extension Community Economic Development Food Systems Team. It is adapted with permission from the Oregon Food Bank's FEAST (n.d.) program.

The broad goal of Missouri EATs is to create healthy, resilient, and equitable community-based food systems. The starting point is a community-wide in-person or on-line forum for participants to engage in an informed and facilitated discussion about the food system. This event is the first step of a larger community organizing process that engages communities to make positive changes over time. The format allows for broad discussions related to local agriculture, hunger, health, and related topics. It relies heavily on local input from community members in general and those representing of local business and agencies.

The essential parts of a forum include the following:

- The local picture is described through panel presentations and discussions.
- The language and tools of community food systems are described and discussed, including concepts such as *community food security* and *community food assessment*.
- Food system priorities are listed through brainstorming and visioning.
- A meal is shared when meeting in person.
- Participants engage in small working groups to better define priorities.

- A Food System Action Plan is created to address priorities.

The Food System Action Plan is a tool used to keep communities engaged after the event and guide their ongoing effort. Communities may choose to hold a combination of small working group meetings, community meals, or quarterly meetings to keep things moving in a positive direction. Annual meetings are encouraged to provide updates and reengage community members. The forum and subsequent activities may all be adapted for an on-line environment.

While there is significant research on how to transform community food systems, multiple authors have argued that current local food system efforts are too focused on economics and generalized approaches. Those authors recommend creating embedded experiences with food in a particular place as a critical step for making changes (DeLind, 2002; Delind, 2006; Turner, 2011; Miedema, Desjardins, and Marshall, 2013). Missouri EATs provides opportunities for community residents to take a place-based approach to transform their community's food system. This process focuses on strengthening communities through leveraging community capitals – social, political, intellectual, human, built, natural and financial (Flora and Flora, n.d.) – which are place-based assets in a community that can give a more comprehensive picture of a community's resources, beyond just financial measures.

Specifically, Missouri EATs focuses on building social capital, which is the networks, relationships, and trust between individuals and organizations within and beyond a community. By supporting a *coming together* of local stakeholders, all with varying interests and resources, Missouri EATs fosters the growth of local networks and relationships. This enables people to work collaboratively to address the comprehensive nature of food system issues in communities. Pender, Marre, and Reeder (2012) highlight the advantages of this approach by noting “different types of capital are often complementary. Investing in one type of capital can increase the returns on investing in another. As such, planning and coordinating across a range of investments is more likely to result in long-term success of rural development efforts.” Ultimately, Missouri EATs enables communities to develop action plans, building on specific assets and opportunities in their food system, and design strategies to leverage local resources.

METHODS

Defining a Missouri EATs community

Because a community's local food system involves all the people, processes, and places involved in moving food from farmers' fields to local farmers markets, stores, restaurants, and dinner tables, groups are encouraged to think broadly about how they draw the borders of their community. For example, it can be helpful to define a community based on its *foodshed* (Kloppenburg, Hendrickson, and Stevenson, 1996), a term borrowed from the concept of a *watershed*, which highlights the interdependence of urban and rural; town and country; and the ways that people, places, and food are connected regardless of city or county borders. In this example, Missouri EATs might be centered in a city but also include farmers, agencies, organizations, and citizens from the surrounding area. In other cases, a county or multi-county region might be the appropriate level to focus activities.

Missouri EATs timeline

While each community is different, it is expected that most will use the following timeline after the initial idea of Missouri EATs is proposed:

- *Pre-planning (1-3 months)*: Understanding what Missouri EATs is, what is involved, and who is interested in taking part (including identifying a Local Lead Partner). Other tasks may

include defining the community, discussing roles and responsibilities, and referencing the Missouri EATs Application and Readiness Tool.

- *Planning (2-4 months)*: Forming a Local Leadership Team (LLT), completing the Missouri EATs Application and Readiness Tool, and establishing roles and responsibilities. Other tasks may include putting plans in place for the kick-off event and recruiting a diverse set of community members.
- *Initiation and follow-through (20-24 months)*: From the time of the kick-off event, it is anticipated that groups will commit two years to seeing the process through. This includes time for the creation of a Food System Action Plan and the formation of workgroups centered on three to four priority areas outlined in the plan. Then, time will be needed for the workgroups to gather resources and initiate programs or policies to meet their goals. It is recommended that the larger group reconvene one year from the original kick-off event to share updates, successes, and challenges. This is also a good time to revisit the action plan, make any needed changes or additions, reshuffle workgroups, and recommit to moving forward.

Getting Started

Experience shows that it is important to build a good team before fully launching Missouri EATs. This includes creating a list of potential Local Leadership Team members who possess one or more of the following qualities:

- Interest in what you are doing.
- Connections to bring people and resources to the effort.
- Skills to make it happen.

It is also important to consider people from diverse backgrounds, professions, and affiliations to ensure that different viewpoints are included.

Once the Local Leadership Team is formed, the group should spend some time getting to know one another, do some assessment of the local food system, and think about their vision for the community, noting that more input will be provided by the larger community once the program is up and running.

Community involvement

It is recommended that groups cast a wide net to include a broad spectrum of food system stakeholders and participants. For the more selective Local Leadership Team (six to 10 members), it is important to think about who is willing to work together and commit the time. For the community-wide forum, include those who have a strong passion and commitment to food system efforts and people who may not already be involved but are looking for ways to contribute. Potential partners include local non-profits and community-based organizations; statewide or national non-profits; food producers (farmers, ranchers, etc.); faith-based organizations; ethnic and cultural associations; government agencies (local, state, and national, including key departments such as public health, sustainability, planning and zoning, and economic development); schools, youth groups and parent groups; colleges and universities; elected officials and their staff; commissions and advisory groups; and businesses, including the chambers of commerce.

Roles and responsibilities

Establishing clear roles and responsibilities among project partners is key to making Missouri EATs run smoothly. The primary Missouri EATs partners include University of Missouri

Extension (Community Economic Development Food Systems Team and Community Engagement Specialist), the Local Lead Partner, and the Local Leadership Team.

The University of Missouri Extension Community Engagement Specialist, in partnership with a Local Lead Partner (LLP), are responsible for co-leading Missouri EATs and sharing responsibility for the following activities:

- Form Local Leadership Team (LLT) and involve team in helping with various tasks.
- Complete Missouri EATs Application and Readiness Tool.
- Plan and co-facilitate forum.
- Plan for post-forum follow-up activities including meetings, events, communications, establishing timeline, etc.
- Administer evaluations and follow-up surveys.
- Submit reports to State Team and participate in monthly conference calls as needed.

The University of Missouri Extension Community Economic Development Food Systems Team will be responsible for the following activities:

- Review Missouri EATs Application and Readiness Tool.
- Provide support for implementing Missouri EATs including identifying potential partners, speakers, and attendees; developing content for presentations; and addressing questions that arise.
- Create evaluations and follow-up surveys; collect and analyze data; share topical resources with Community Engagement Specialist and Local Lead Partner.
- Host monthly conference call.

The Local Leadership Team (LLT) is comprised of six to 10 individuals from the community who are willing to assist with planning and running Missouri EATs. Members should be willing to help with various tasks and chair committees as needed. Typical LLT responsibilities include the following:

- Participate in Missouri EATs Application and Readiness Tool.
- Assist with planning the forum.
- Provide leadership for various work groups that arise from the Food System Action Plan.
- Volunteer for various tasks including the following:
 - Communications: Sending meeting reminders, preparing news stories and information for key stakeholders and community leaders, updating social media.
 - Logistics: Finding meeting locations and arranging equipment needs, meals, and refreshments.
 - Recruitment and outreach: Identifying key participants to ensure diversity.
 - Documentation: Recording and sharing notes, recording forums if needed.

Community investment

A community's investment will come in various forms. First, it is important to recognize that communities will be investing their time and effort to make Missouri EATs happen. The MU Extension Community Engagement Specialist's role, along with the Local Lead Partner, are to create the framework for the community to provide input, draft an action plan, and work through the action plan. MU Extension has the community development expertise to make this happen and can support Missouri EATs with a variety of experts and programs during the follow-up stages. However, the community will be doing the work to identify the community's assets and needs, putting pencil to paper, and making things happen. Likewise, the Local Lead Partner and Local

Leadership Team will be investing their time and effort to help plan, initiate, and carry-out Missouri EATs.

In addition to time and effort, communities are expected to make other in-kind contributions that may include providing facilities and meeting rooms; meals and snacks; office supplies; and administrative support, among other things.

Finally, there may sometimes be a financial cost to participate in Missouri EATs. If this is the case, the cost may be covered through registration fees from the kick-off event, sponsorships, or grants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Missouri Eats outcomes

The specific outcomes of Missouri EATs are hard to predict and will depend on who is involved, their willingness and ability to work together, and the resources that can be garnered to make things happen. In general terms, success includes the following:

- People can understand what Missouri EATs is, how it works, and what is possible.
- People will gain an understanding of the resources available through MU Extension, other organizations, and the community at-large.
- Stakeholders develop positive working relationships, learn to find common ground, and better understand the strengths and challenges of their local food system.
- The voices of community members from diverse backgrounds are included.
- A successful kick-off event occurs that leads to the creation of a Food System Action Plan.
- Effort is made to work the plan, seek resources, and initiate programs and policies.

More specifically, between mid-2019 and the end of 2020, Missouri EATs pilot communities initiated the following activities:

- Created more clearly defined goals and partner connections for the development of an urban agriculture center.
- Leveraged Missouri EATs planning and partners to apply for and receive grants.
- Connected local and regional food systems development efforts to enhance the creation of a rural farmers market, shared-use kitchen, and regional food hub.
- Developed new community gardens, a year-round farmers market, and youth culinary education using locally produced food.
- Enhanced partnerships between city government, local producers, and emergency food providers.
- Adapted the Missouri EATs whole-day forum to a multi-day, on-line event.

The future of Missouri EATs

The MU Extension Community Economic Development Food Systems Team will continue to engage with current pilot communities and solicit interest from at least two additional communities in 2021. There is also an opportunity to partner with a regional local foods marketing association to offer Missouri EATs in communities that fall within the association's boundaries. A Missouri EATs leader guide will be published and eventually, a *train-the-trainer* training will be created and offered. The program will continue to make adaptations to ensure personal safety while Covid-19 remains a concern.

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