Using participatory research to expand the customer base of farmers markets

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Abstract

Direct-to-consumer sales (DTC) through farmers markets, CSAs, and urban farm stands is an important venue for bringing fresh, nutritious, and regional food to urban consumers and creating economic and social linkages between urban and peri-urban farms. However, many urban consumers who use government food programs have limited access to DTC markets. Farmers Market LIFE (Local Incentives for Food and Economy) seeks to expand the customer base of farmers market shoppers in Sonoma County, California, through the acceptance of SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and Market Match, a dollar-for-dollar nutrition incentive program that makes farmers markets more economically accessible to low-income shoppers while also increasing overall sales for farmers' market vendors. We explore the use of "environmental scans" an innovative research instrument used at farmers' markets to identify social, cultural, linguistic, behavioral and economic obstacles and opportunities for low-income consumers and people of color to shop at farmers' markets. Community partners co-designed and gathered data about selected farmers markets using environmental scans in fall 2019. This methodology has proved effective in providing insight into farmers' market dynamics including potential barriers and solutions to make farmers' markets more accessible and inviting to SNAP customers and people of color. We share results of this tool as a method that others interested in community-engaged research may want to use to investigate their own unique farmers' market settings and to illustrate the nature of findings from our application of the tool in Sonoma County, California, in 2019.

Keywords

food systems research, community-engaged research, SNAP, nutrition incentives, low-income farmers market shoppers, environmental scan

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Direct-to-consumer sales (DTC) through farmers markets, CSAs, and urban farm stands is an important venue for bringing fresh, nutritious, and regional food to urban consumers and creating economic and social linkages between urban and peri-urban farms. However, many urban consumers who use government food programs have limited access to DTC markets. Farmers Market LIFE (Local Incentives for Food and Economy) seeks to expand the customer base of farmers market shoppers in Sonoma County, California, through the acceptance of SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and Market Match, a dollar-for-dollar nutrition incentive program. This program makes farmers markets more economically accessible to low-income shoppers while also increasing overall sales for farmers' market vendors. We explore the use of "environmental scans," an innovative community-engaged research instrument used at farmers' markets to identify social, cultural, linguistic, behavioral and economic obstacles and opportunities for low-income consumers and people of color to shop at farmers' markets. Community partners co-designed and gathered data about selected farmers markets using environmental scans in fall 2019. This methodology has proved effective in providing insight into farmers' market dynamics including potential barriers and solutions to make farmers' markets more accessible and inviting to SNAP customers and people of color. We share results of this tool as a method that others interested in community-engaged research may want to use to investigate their own unique farmers' market settings and to illustrate the nature of findings from our application of the tool in Sonoma County, California, in 2019.

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INTRODUCTION

Direct-to-consumer sales through farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture, and urban farm stands have become an important venue for bringing fresh, nutritious, regional food to urban consumers and creating economic and social linkages between urban and peri-urban farms and consumers (Low, et al. 2015). The most recent data from the USDA show that farmers market managers operated 8,140 farmers markets in 2019 in the United States (NASS, 2020). However, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the growth in direct-to-consumer sales had begun to plateau for many local food producers nationwide. The national count of farmers market listings, for example, showed only a 2.5% increase from 2014 to 2015 (National Farmers Market Directory, 2020). Even now, during the pandemic, many urban consumers, particularly those using government food programs (SNAP, WIC, and the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program), have limited access to direct-to-consumer sales opportunities. Only about half of the total farmers markets operated by market managers accept any Federal Nutrition Programs (NASS, 2020). Further, certain demographics are underrepresented at farmers markets, specifically, low-income consumers, people of color, immigrant shoppers and non-native English language speakers (Colasanti, et al., 2010; Freedman, et al., 2016). Northern California is no different, even when markets are located in diverse neighborhoods or where there is a high density of individuals enrolled in SNAP. In 2018, there were 29,783 non-unique households in Sonoma County enrolled in SNAP who lived within 2 miles of a farmers' market, with a combined purchasing power of $3,567,036 in SNAP benefits distributed. Yet there were only 520 Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) swipes made at neighboring farmers markets, resulting in just $8,044 in SNAP benefits spent. This represents just 0.23% of total

SNAP benefits available in a 2-mile radius in July 2018, a peak time for farmers market sales (Malachowski, 2018; Camper, 2020).

Since 2014, Petaluma Bounty has led Farmers Market LIFE (Local Incentives for Food and Economy), an incentive program involving four farmers' market associations operating 15 participating farmers markets in Sonoma and Marin counties, California. Farmers Market LIFE (FM LIFE) matches customers' SNAP benefits spent on produce, dollar-for-dollar, up to a $10 or $20 maximum per visit, depending on the market. FM LIFE seeks to expand the customer base of farmers markets by making farmers markets more inclusive and increasing overall sales for farmers market vendors.

Since 2016, in collaboration with the Center for Well-Being and the County of Sonoma's Health Department, FM LIFE partners have provided food and nutrition education targeting SNAP and SNAP-eligible recipients, using produce purchased at the farmers market and conducting farmers market tours that reached over 2,000 customers. Hispanic and Latino households make up about 26 percent of the SNAP recipients in Sonoma County (CalFresh data dashboard, 2020), so much of this educational outreach engages the Latinx community.

Beginning in fall 2018, the USDA (FMPP) funded a collaborative project with the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources Farmers Market LIFE, and the Center for Well-Being to build on the FM LIFE nutrition incentive program. The goal of the project is to conduct community-engaged research to identify obstacles for SNAP users and people of color to shop at farmers markets and collaboratively devise locally-relevant, multi-cultural solutions to make farmers markets more inclusive, welcoming and inviting for those on SNAP and the whole community. The project is now engaged in the research phase of the project. In addition to a comprehensive literature review of barriers and actions that other farmers markets across the country have taken to achieve similar goals, this project engages community partners from the Center of Well-Being to gather baseline data to identify social, cultural, linguistic, behavioral and economic obstacles and opportunities for SNAP users and people of color to shop at farmers markets. As bicultural and bilingual Spanish speakers from Sonoma County, the staff at the Center for Well-Being reflect the communities in which they live and work and are uniquely equipped to observe and critically reflect on the challenges they may face while shopping at farmers markets and the solutions they may envision. At the end of the project, we will evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions based on SNAP sales, vendors' self-assessment of sales, and feedback from market customers, farm vendors, and market managers. We will also develop a toolkit to help other communities apply community-engaged research methods at farmers markets. Figure 1 shows a logic model that describes the scope of the project in its entirety. This paper focuses on the development and use of one tool, the "environmental scan" and is part of the box on conducting community-engaged research.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Community partners helped design and gather data about selected markets through an "environmental scan." This tool has proved highly effective at providing insights into market dynamics including potential locally based barriers and solutions that already exist at some markets. This paper shares the results of this tool as well as highlights its methodological potential for other community-engaged research.

Environmental scans were conducted by four bilingual and bi-cultural community health educators (CHEs) from the Center for Well-Being. CHEs went in pairs to gather observations of five farmers markets two times (n = 20 scans) in October and November 2019. Observations were collected on iPads, using a Qualtrics survey. The focus of the survey questions was observations of market characteristics (e.g., number of vendors of color, signs seen in various languages, etc.) and perceptions of market inclusivity and welcomeness for low-income SNAP customers, people of

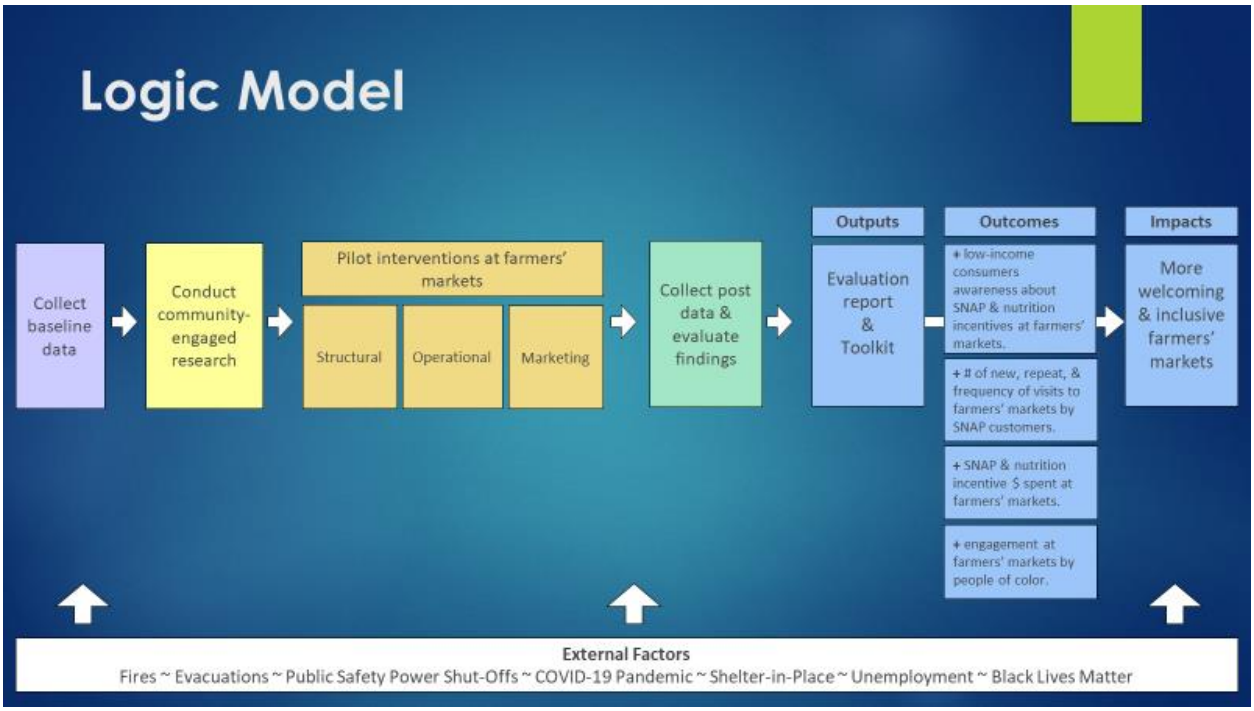

Figure 1. Logic Model for the Farmers Market LIFE project.

color, families with children, and older adults. Ratings for observations were based on a Likert scale of 1-10. In addition, the CHEs purchased produce with $20 worth of SNAP and Market Match, took photographs, and wrote open-ended reflections of their experiences.

Quantitative data were analyzed using Excel and qualitative data were summarized. The aggregated findings were shared back with the CHEs through a focus group for member checking in order to confirm accuracy and add additional nuance and group reflection. Summaries for each of the five markets were provided to market managers and an overall summary was posted online here: https://sarep.ucdavis.edu/fs/snap.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following results are based on the five farmers' markets where the environmental scans were conducted.

Observations of diversity

Reviewers noted a large range in the numbers of vendors (26% - 57%) and shoppers (8% - 30%) of color.

Signage

There were very few signs in a language other than English. Only half of the CHEs saw signs about EBT, SNAP or Market Match incentives in Spanish; one educator saw signs in another language but only at one market. According to CHEs, signs in Spanish are important because of their potential to signify that the market is welcoming to Spanish-speaking customers.

Cleanliness, safety

Cleanliness and safety were rated fairly high (8.8 out of 10), although it is important to note these data were collected prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Friendliness

CHEs rated the market on friendliness to lower-income shoppers as 5.5/10; to people of color (6.6/10) for older adults (8.8/10) and to shoppers with children (5.8/10).

Food

CHEs rated the food sold at the market for cultural appropriateness (7.4/10); quality of the fruits and vegetables (7.8/10) and affordability (2.9/10). Affordability was the only attribute that was consistently low.

Overall inclusivity

CHEs were asked to imagine a farmers' market where people of every race, language, age and gender are equally welcomed and included and then to rate how inclusive that market felt compared to the "ideal" market. We acknowledge and the CHEs agreed that everyone's imagined ideal farmers market may be different; yet, we still felt it was important to capture. The average score was 6.5/10.

Use of SNAP & Market Match

CHEs rated their experiences obtaining and shopping with scrip, both wooden EBT tokens and paper Market Match vouchers. Getting the scrip rated 8.2/10 (with a range of 4-10) and shopping with the scrip rated 7.9/10 (with a range of 4-9). Comments about using the tokens were informative. For example, CHEs said that generally, prices were not known until the produce was weighed by the vendor. They associated a feeling of shame when they did not have enough to pay since they only had $20 in scrip and would end up having to return part of their intended purchase. They felt that having a pre-bagged, set price was much more helpful in order to shop within a budget. CHEs mentioned that it was hard to spend exactly $20 and not go over that amount, especially since giving change is not possible with the scrip and some vendors were firm on their price. Overall, it was hard for CHEs to stay within the limited budget they had to work with.

Focus group

A focus groups was held with the CHEs and the research team to share the aggregated preliminary findings from the environmental scans with the CHEs to confirm accuracy for member checking, add additional nuance, and provide an opportunity for group dialog and reflection. Consensus that emerged from the focus group was that farmers markets are a 'special treat' or activity to do with family and friends and that they serve as important and vibrant community spaces.

Since this research was conducted, it is important to note the substantial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on farmers markets as both retail food outlets and as community gathering spaces. We hypothesize that results of environmental scans would be very different if conducted in the present day. For example, assessing the 'safety' of farmers markets takes on new meaning within the context of community transmission of COVID-19, where 'safety' may mean something altogether different with physical distancing, cleanliness, hygiene, and COVID-safety protocols at the forefront of customer's minds.

Limitations of this study include acknowledgement that CHEs were of the same gender (female) as well as similar age (20s to early 30s) and familial status (unmarried and living within multigenerational households). Expanding this methodology to include more diverse scanners including older adults and non-native English speakers from other backgrounds, as well as scanners who hold the primary responsibility for grocery shopping or financial decisions within households would bolster this approach.

CONCLUSION

The environmental scan revealed several lessons. First, to be inclusive and welcoming to everyone, farmers markets in Marin and Sonoma counties need to be more multilingual and multicultural, especially by paying closer attention to signage and market staffing. They need to understand the demographics of clientele that live near the markets and be responsive to these communities. Second, CHEs found through the Environmental Scan that the farmers market are already and can become even greater welcoming community gathering spaces. It will be up to the collaborative team, with input from market managers, customers and vendors, to devise strategies that can improve the overall inclusivity rating and other dimensions of the Environmental Scan. At present, the team is conducting focus groups and surveys about the farmers market with customers, non-customers, and vendors to provide additional baseline data and ideas for market improvements.

Since the Environmental Scan was conducted in the fall of 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has become a reality and farmers markets nationwide have had to pivot to ensure the safety of both customers and vendors. Additionally, social and racial injustices have become much more visible and communities are grappling with and poised to make changes. Finally, in California, fires have ravaged much of the state, including family farms that rely on farmers markets to sell their produce. Some markets have had to close due to evacuations, air quality, or other community health concerns. This research team is currently systematically outlining the ways in which the pandemic, the fires and social unrest has forced changes with customers, vendors, the market environment and how these dynamic conditions impacted the implementation of this study.

We are fortunate that we were able to use the Environmental Scan before major changes occurred at the markets so that we have baseline data. Observations from CHEs have been invaluable in articulating market limitations under those conditions. The strategies that emerge in the future to make markets more inclusive and welcoming will need to meet the additional challenges posed by COVID-19, the fires and be more sensitive to structural racism. Yet, the upheavals that have occurred in our communities also open doors for new ways of organizing our farmers markets and for involving our community members in participating more fully in their local food systems. Although it may be less linear and more time intensive than other approaches to research, community engaged research helped our team remain flexible and relevant to rapidly changing external conditions.

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