Defining stability, operational capacity, and shared resources, tools, and knowledge: Results from the RFSP Partners Focus Groups

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Overview

In early 2021, the USDA awarded a three-year Regional Food System Partnerships (RFSP) grant to the New Mexico Farmers Markets Association (NMFMA). The UNM Evaluation Lab (Eval Lab) was written into the grant as a support partner. Beginning in August, and under the supervision of the Eval Lab's Associate Director, Melissa Binder, three Master of Public Policy students, Mary Costello, Arlo Menchaca and Brisa Rodriguez, attended RFSP support team meetings, met with NMFMA evaluator Christin Keibler, reviewed project documents, and conducted a literature review in order to become familiar with the project and with collective impact and food value chain frameworks.

By September, the Eval Lab team and Christina had agreed that the Lab's effort would focus on designing and implementing an evaluation of the project's third goal:

> *to improve the stability and operational capacity of partners through development of shared resources, tools and knowledge.*

The team's first task was to scour the research literature for accepted definitions of the terms in the third goal (stability, operational capacity, shared resources, tools and knowledge). Unfortunately, the team found no widely accepted definitions. The lack of consensus in the literature, however, provided the opportunity to have project partners discuss and define the terms themselves. We decided that focus groups would be an ideal format for the information we needed. A planned project retreat in November provided the perfect venue.

With the help Christina and experienced Lab focus group leader, Charla Orozco, we developed four focus group activities to:

1. ***elicit how partners understand stability and operational capacity***
2. ***identify tools, resources, and knowledge barriers***
3. ***consider how tools, resources and knowledge could be shared.***

Results

The focus groups yielded a series of concepts that define stability and operational capacity. For example, partners associated stability with financial security, resilience and the

experience of safety, among other concepts. (See p. 5 for the list of statements.) The concepts can be quantified by asking partners to rate agreement with them on a 7 point Likert scale. Partners could also report on (1) whether each stability and operational capacity concept has increased, decreased or remained the same compared with a year ago, and (2) the degree to which the RFSP contributed to those changes. Responses in early 2022 and 2023 and at the end of 2023 would provide information that spans the 3 years of the project.

The data on relevant and shared tools, resources and knowledge revealed a series of meaningful categories. We can ask partners whether they have recently shared tools, resources and knowledge in these categories. (See the first column of tables 1, 2 and 3 for lists of categories.) A comparison of responses over time would reveal whether sharing has increased. Again, responses in the three periods suggested above would provide information for 3 separate periods of the project.

What is the UNM Evaluation Lab?

The mission of the Evaluation Lab is to build evaluation capacity among public and nonprofit organizations in New Mexico. We do this by training graduate students and community members, and by partnering with nonprofit and public organizations to conduct evaluations.

We also take on external evaluation projects where there is great potential for capacity building and collaboration among stakeholders, as well as training opportunities for graduate students in the MPP program.

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The Focus Groups

The Eval Lab uses active focus groups as a best practice. In active focus groups, participants create lists in small groups, question and respond to each other in pairs, and complete individual tasks using visualizations. Active groups ensure that all participants contribute and allow for expression in a variety of modes.

To elicit how partners understand stability and operational capacity, groups of three and four participants responded to prompts on flip chart paper. The prompts stated: "If I have operational capacity then I . . ." and "If I have operational capacity then I. . ." The inspiration for this format was an article on creating an algorithm for assessing knowledge sharing in agri-food value chains. Value chain experts were given a series of statements to evaluate. If certain clusters of statements were assessed in a particular way, the algorithm determined whether knowledge sharing was present.[1] We thought we could use a similar system for assessing whether stability and operational capacity were present.

To identify tools and resources, we simply asked participants to list the tools and resources they used in the value chain. Participants created these lists in pairs. To identify knowledge barriers, we adapted a visualization developed by a European Union funded research project for "Enhancing and implementing Knowledge based ICT solutions within high Risk and Uncertain Conditions for Agriculture Production Systems (RUC-APS)." RUC-APS uses the visualization to help value chain participants identify and overcome knowledge barriers. (See figure 1.) We also had participants write down knowledge they had (within the borders of an image of a brain) and knowledge they did not have that would be helpful for their work (outside of the brain borders). (See figure 2.)

Figure 1. Visualization of Knowledge Barriers

Source: "Knowledge mobilization for agri-food value chains," RUC-APS instructional video, https://ruc-aps.eu/demonstrator-university-of-plymouth/.

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[1] Boshkoska, Biljana Mileva, Shaofeng Liuc, Guoqing Zhaoc, Alejandro Fernandezd, Susana Gamboa, Mariana del Pinod, Pascale Zaratee, Jorge Hernandez, and Huilan Chenh. 2019. "A decision support system for evaluation of the knowledge sharing crossing boundaries in agri-food value chains." *Computers in Industry 110*: 64–80.

Figure 2. Brain Image

Finally, we considered how tools, resources and knowledge could be shared by having the paired participants brainstorm methods.

On November 11, 2021, during the project retreat at the Sevilleta Field Station, and with the help of RFSP partners Christina Keibler, Opheilia Steppe, and Helga Garza, we facilitated three focus groups: two in-person and one via Zoom.[2] A total of 26 project partners participated.

We then transferred the written responses to excel and coded and themed all responses with the help of Christina.

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[2] Participants attending via Zoom shared their responses using a Google jamboard.

1. Defining Stability and Operational Capacity

Using the if-then activity described above, we derived the following elements that indicate stability and operational capacity.

When organizations have Stability they:

Have financial security.
Can weather storms.
Have a stable customer base.
Maintain staff.

And those leading the organization:

Experience safety.
Plan for the future and commit to long-term projects.
Take risks.
Have time to enjoy life.

When organizations have Operational Capacity they:

Are efficient and effective.
Produce more.
Address community needs.
Expand into new areas of operation.

And those leading the organization:

Have time for reflection, creativity and pursuing opportunities.
Build relationships and provide leadership.
Have time to enjoy life.

We can measure these concepts using:

- 7-point Likert scales to assess agreement with each element of stability and operational capacity.
- Reflection on whether each element of stability and operational capacity increased, decreased or remained the same compared with a year ago.
- Reflection on contribution of the RFSP to change in each element of stability and operational capacity.

2. Identifying Tools, Resources and Knowledge Barriers

Participants came up with a list of tools and resources relating to farm production, community and human capital. Production tools and resources relate to farming and business practices, inputs such as land, water and labor, distribution, infrastructure and technology. Community tools and resources relate to communication, community connections and knowledge, nutrition programs such as Double-Up Food Bucks, access to markets and knowledge about consumers, peer networks, and grower support services. (See table 1.)

A majority of participants reported barriers with state government. About half reported barriers with ag extension and senior centers. Between 30 and 40 percent reported knowledge barriers with value chain coordinators, food distributors, wholesalers, direct-to-consumers retailers, food hubs, and growers. About a quarter reported barriers with the school meal program and consumers. (See figure 3.)

One way to measure whether the RFSP has affected sharing among partners is to have them assess whether they have recently shared the types of tools and resources in table 1. A comparison of responses over time would reveal whether sharing has increased. Similarly, knowledge sharing can be assessed by measuring whether partners report fewer barriers over time.

Figure 3. Percent of focus group participants who reported a knowledge barrier, by the value chain role of the knowledge holder
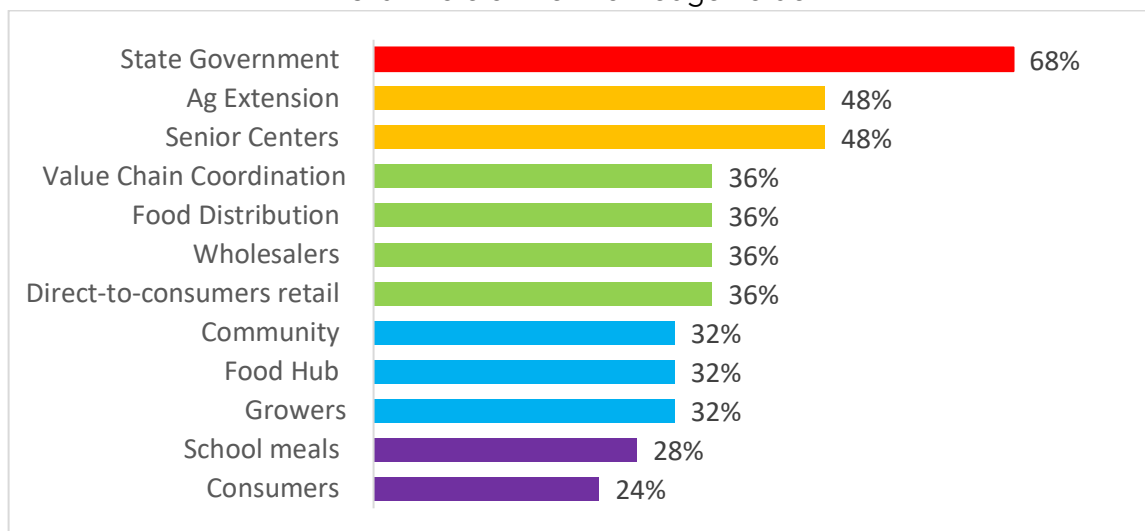
Table 1. Tools and Resources Identified by Focus Group Participants

TYPE	DESCRIPTION
Production	
Business	aggregation points and tools, data, insurance, procurement, product specs, risk assessments and scale
Distribution	distribution, including packaging and transportation
Food Production Practices	food and food safety, drip irrigation, compost and regeneration
Funding	capital and grants
Inputs	labor, land, water, soil, and seeds
Infrastructure & Equipment	dry and cold storage, greenhouses, office space; and equipment, including farm equipment, hand tools, storage, trucks, cold storage and refrigerated vehicles
Technology	including phones, computers, EBT machines, business and collaboration software (Square, Slack)
Community	
Communication	communication, including social media and outreach
Community	community awareness and respect, community connection, organizers, advocacy, community relationships and knowledge
Nutrition Programs	institutions, including the state, DUFB, SNAP and WIC
Markets / Consumers	including access to markets and consumers and resources for consumers including meal planning and food buying guides.
Networks	including peers, partners, community, decision-makers, personal interactions and trust
Support Services	including non-profits, technical support, and soil lab
Human Capital	
Knowledge & Skills	knowledge, including access to information via the internet, culture and history, capacity-building, food safety SOPs, local/state/tribal resources, trainings; and skills, including facilitation, strategic and systems thinking
Personal Traits	including drive, passion, positivity and commitment

3. Considering how tools, resources and knowledge could be shared

Participants generated many ideas for sharing tools and resources. Among the most frequent suggestions were communication and networking. Specific communication ideas include bulletin/community boards, listservs, conferences and retreats and social media. One partner suggested a state-wide story-telling tour. Partners also suggested collaboration agreements, co-ops and collective impact projects. Other ideas including having a sole source for vendor sales, data-sharing, marketing, production resources (including acequias, aggregation and transportation, community composting and equipment sharing), creating resource guides, and trainings and mentorships. (See table 2.)

Table 2. Ideas for Shared Tools and Resources

SHARED TOOLS AND RESOURCES	DESCRIPTION
Asset mapping and needs assessment	can underutilized facilities be matched with unmet needs?
Attitudes	including compassion, trust, consensus, equity and transparency
Communication and Networking	including outreach, sharing with colleagues, blog posts, billboard/community boards, listservs, newsletters, online communities and social media, retreats and conferences, statewide touring and story-telling events, collaborating platforms like Slack, website development
Collaboration	including co-ops, collaboratives, shared agreements, one source for vendor sales, re-granting, and collective impact projects
Data Sharing	
Marketing	
Production	Including acequias, aggregation and transportation, community composting, equipment sharing
Resource Guides	for SOP sharing
Training	including training, mentoring and workshops

We organized responses to the inside and outside the brain activity into categories of *knowledge held*, *knowledge needed*, and – when an item appeared in both categories – *overlapping knowledge*.

There were many overlapping areas, including aggregation / food hubs, business, communities, cultural intelligence, distribution, food safety, funding, grower practices, marketing and markets, planning, and policy. (See figure 4.)

In many cases, knowledge needed and knowledge held matched perfectly. For example, several partners listed knowledge held for particular food safety certifications, and several listed food safety certification as knowledge needed. Other notable match-ups included risk management in the business category, grant-writing in the funding category, and state government contacts in the policy and government category. Three areas for which there were no comparable knowledge held items for needed knowledge were access to land, ag extension work and data. (See figure 4 and table 3.)

The "sharing tools and resources" and "overlapping knowledge" data provide more dimensions along which partners can assess sharing. And, as suggested in the previous section, comparison of responses over time would reveal whether sharing has increased.
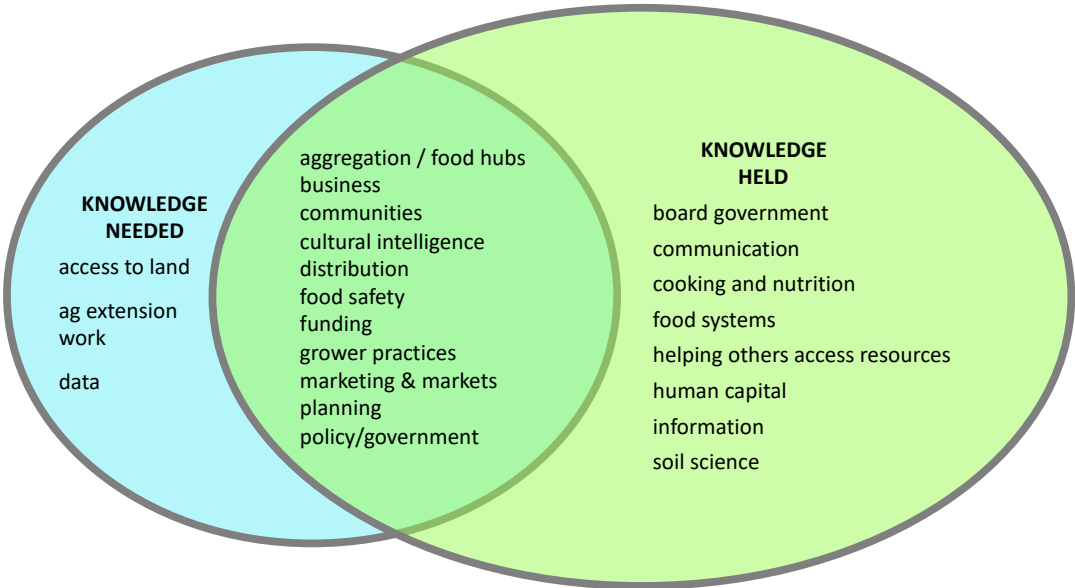
Figure 4. Knowledge Needed / Knowledge Held

Table 3. Knowledge overlap for items listed as needed knowledge

THEMES	KNOWLEDGE NEEDED	KNOWLEDGE HELD
Business	including development, farmer business models, financial management, and risk management	including development, planning, administration, management, profit analysis , managing budgets and risk management
Co-Ops	listed in both categories	
Communities	including assets & opportunities, food insecurity organizations, land-grant communities	including food insecurity and health outcomes/challenges
Cultural Intelligence	including Spanish and indigenous languages, tribal governance and markets, and history of Black farmers and ranchers in NM	including indigenous and Chicano history, world view and languages, tribal governance
Table 3, continued	... related to food justice, and the ... impact of big ag	not listed as knowledge held
Distribution	including distributional models and packaging	no details provided
Food Safety	including food safety training	including GAP and HACCP certification
Funding	including funding food hub infrastructure, grant writing, investment funds, sources of funding.	including grant writing and federal grant writing, fundraising for regenerative ag, sources of funding.
Grower Know-How & Practices	including equipment purchasing, production, food safety, inspection prep, meat processing and inspection and regenerative practices for CAFOs	including experience, analytical crop planting, food production, seasonal production, seed types, soil health and conservation, and traditional growing values
Marketing & Markets	including consumer cooking patterns, ability to meet wholesalers' demand, independent groceries, which schools are NM Grown, potential demand, retail and wholesale pricing, retail.	including branding, digital content development, consumer behavior, CSA, farmers markets and farm stands, pricing, NM Grown, procurement, retail and wholesale
Planning	including farm production, business opportunities, food trend, organic farming, current and future water supply	including business and farm planning, work plans and program development
Policy & Government	including advocacy and organizing, laws related to the environment and water, water rights, local and national policy, impact of policy, engaging lawmakers, legislative process, the political environment, regulation, workforce training, government procurement, government motivations, regulation, staff contacts	including advocating for state funds, community organizing, contacts at NMDA, working with policy leaders, policy development, regional food systems, soil health, water, and DUFB and RX well programs

Note: Ag extension and access to land were also listed as needed knowledge, however, those were standalone categories with no further description provided.