



FINAL WORDS



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As we complete this guide we have reason for optimism. More and more communities are getting involved in planning for agriculture and food systems—we can't keep up with them! Demand for local and organic food and farm products has never been higher, and 2015 marked the most significant annual improvement in food security since the Great Recession.

Evidence is mounting to show the economic development potential of food system investments. New ideas about regenerative agriculture and bio-regional food systems are capturing people's imagination—extending the concept of a foodshed to focus on a region's ecological resources, celebrating the power of small actions to transform the bigger picture, connecting social and ecological systems to sustain people, nature, and the economy.

We wrote *Growing Local* to help communities strengthen their food systems and grow local economies—by sustaining their farms and ranches, investing in needed infrastructure and nourishing their residents. We wanted to share principles and practices and a full complement of tools that you can consider and adapt to your own conditions and circumstances.

We hope we have offered some inspiration as well as information to help you take next steps—however large or small. And we urge you to merge what you learn from the guide with a broader commitment to creating a more just and resilient food system in the places you live, work, and play—through planning and policy but also through your own personal actions.

It is up to us!

Despite steady advances over the past few years, more than 40 million Americans still live in food insecure households. Small and mid-size farmers continue to struggle to make ends

meet. The Farm Bill is up for reauthorization, which will affect the entire food system—from nutrition assistance programs like SNAP to conservation programs that protect farmland and improve soil health and water quality. Seventy-nine percent of 2014 Farm Bill funding went to nutrition programs. This legislation has a significant impact on food security. In smaller ways, the Farm Bill also supports many of the approaches highlighted in this guide: helping farmers invest in season extension techniques, schools participate in Farm to School programs, communities build food hubs and other infrastructure, and developing local marketing opportunities. Other policy issues also are being debated that have substantial implications for the food system—from immigration and trade to research on climate change.

One thing we have learned is that we cannot solely rely on the federal government and the private marketplace to ensure agricultural viability or community food security. Communities have a major role to play envisioning, developing, and implementing plans and policies that support—and *do not thwart*—healthy and resilient food systems. And since we all live in communities, we all can play a role—through public participation and civic engagement, by the choices we make about where we shop and what food we eat, and by casting our votes for supportive elected officials.

Growing Food Connections has given us the rare opportunity to work with remarkable and dedicated people in very diverse communities across the country. They have confirmed that food is the great connector—not just between farmers and eaters, but between rural and urban, conservative and liberal, and the natural and built environments. And they have affirmed Margaret Mead's motivational statement: *"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."*