Support diverse, family and cooperatively owned, small and mid-sized agricultural and food processing operations within the local area or region.

When local economies prosper, we all benefit. Dollars spent at locally-owned businesses have been shown to create greater economic and social impact than dollars spent at large national or regional chain stores. Food is no exception. A study of farm-to-school programs, which connect school food procurement with local food producers, showed that every dollar spent stimulates an additional $0.60 – $2.16 of local economic activity. Investing in local food, from farmers to community-owned businesses, is one entry point to creating high quality jobs and strengthening local economies—especially when investments are directed towards those who are most often excluded from market opportunities.

Over the last 60 years, decisions about food and farming systems have been made by fewer and fewer people, with growing influence from the corporate sector. As power becomes more concentrated, consumers, workers, and farmers are marginalized from making decisions about our food system, with people of color especially excluded. US agriculture was founded on the theft of Native lands, slavery, and the exploitation of people of color—a legacy of racism and injustice that continues to ripple through the food system in the form of health disparities and discrimination. The landmark 1999 Pigford v. Glickman class action lawsuit, for instance, exposed how the US Department of Agriculture denied loans or otherwise discriminated against thousands of African American farmers. Minority farmers continue to be underrepresented in US agriculture and face steep barriers to success, though they are often at the forefront of efforts to build sustainable communities around food.

Healthy local and regional food systems are built and strengthened by fostering relationships between producers and consumers. Access to fresh, nutritious food for all creates the foundation for long-term economic vitality and public health. Demand for local food is growing: in 2014, sales totaled approximately $12 billion, with industry sources estimating the market’s value could hit $20 billion by 2019. The number of farmers’ markets increased by 93.3 percent between 2006 and 2014 while the number of food hubs—each of which creates 20 jobs and generates $4 million in
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annual sales on average—doubled between 2009 and 2016. In the case of farm-to-school, the USDA estimates that schools spent nearly $800 million on local food in the 2013-2014 period and the future buying power of farm-to-school could result in an additional $350 million for family farmers, with a full economic impact of $1 billion.

Public institutions have the potential to contribute to the vitality of their communities. Through values-based supply chains that prioritize local, sustainable farmers and businesses as well as farmers of color, institutions can harness their purchasing power to contribute to strong local and regional food economies.