

EXPLORING THE ROLES OF BC'S FOOD HUBS IN REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS: SUMMARY REPORT



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Authors:

Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen, Selkirk Innovates
Dr. Lindsay Harris, Kamloops Food Policy Council
Damon Chouinard, Central Kootenay Food Policy Council
Caitlin Quist, Selkirk Innovates

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ABOUT THE STUDY

This study explores food hubs in British Columbia and the roles they play in resilient food systems. It is part of a larger project exploring food system resilience through Alternative Food Networks. For details visit csahs.uoguelph.ca/resilience-and-alternative-food-networks-learning-covid-19-fire-and-other-stressors-local-fisheries.

This study started with four research questions:

1. What roles do food hubs play within regional food systems?
2. How do the roles match the needs of regional food systems?
3. What region-specific conditions impact the ability of food hubs to be resilient and sustainable?
4. What impact have times of stress/crisis/major disturbances (COVID, floods, fires) had on regional food systems through the lens of food hubs?

These original research questions evolved into four simplified questions which frame the findings in this report. These questions are:

1. What role do food hubs currently play?
2. How do these roles match what is needed?
3. What role do food hubs want to play, in order to match the needs of their regions?
4. What is preventing food hubs from reaching this potential?

For each of our research objectives, we collected and analyzed data through different methods.

Objective 1: Map the evolving structure and function of the BC Food Hub Community of Practice

Through attendance at BC Food Hub Community of Practice (COP) meetings, we collected data related to: the types of organizations attending, the types of relationships between organizations and how these evolve, the topics discussed, and links to the overarching food system.

Objective 2: Explore the evolution and resilience of regional food systems

Through COP observation, interviews with key informants, and participation in Grow and Connect Interior (www.growandconnect.ca), we explored links and interactions between organizations within regional food systems.

Objective 3: Conduct a detailed exploration and gain an understanding of select food hubs and their contribution within their regional food systems

Through a series of interviews with key stakeholders we developed an in-depth understanding of the development of these hubs, the evolution of their roles within regional food systems, and their needs and challenges.

Objective 4: Cross case comparison

Through a combined analysis of the above, we have identified key overarching findings and transferable lessons.

Please note that the results presented in this report are a result of the data collected from participating hubs, and therefore may not present a complete picture of food hubs in BC. The data collected is determined not only by who attends COP meetings, but also by who participates.

WHAT IS A FOOD HUB?

Food hubs are increasingly being implemented by communities seeking to create more sustainable, resilient food systems. There are many definitions that describe food hubs and the roles they play. While the purpose and model of any single food hub is highly contextual, the following definitions from the literature highlight some of the commonalities:

A FOOD HUB IS...

"A business or organization that actively manages the **aggregation, distribution, and marketing** of source-identified food products primarily from **local and regional producers**..." – Fischer, Hamm, Pirog, Fisk, Farbman, and Kirlay, 2013

"Grassroots, community-based organizations and individuals that work together to build increasingly **socially just, economically robust and ecologically sound food systems** that connect farmers with consumers" – Blay-Palmer, Landman, Knezevic, and Hayhurst, 2013

"**Meeting the needs of small and "ag-of-the-middle"** farmers who lack the capacity to meet the specific volume, quality, and consistency requirements of larger scale buyers" – United States Department of Agriculture, 2017

"Entities that **sit between people who produce food and people who use it**, gathering food from growers and distributing it either to commercial customers or directly to consumers – often working with an explicit set of ethical priorities" – Guzman, Paola, and Christian Reynolds, 2019

"Food Hubs are an example of an **Alternative Food Network**. AFNs are a collection of initiatives such as farmers' markets, cooperatives and community supported agriculture that aim to create closer links between food producers and their consumers and communities." – Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman, 2012



WHAT IS A FOOD HUB IN BRITISH COLUMBIA?

Beginning in 2018, the BC Food Hub Network was initiated by the Government of BC, aiming to "foster growth and innovation in the processing sector".¹

Food hubs as defined by the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food (the Ministry) are: "Shared-use food and beverage processing facilities that offer food and agriculture businesses access to commercial processing space, equipment, expertise and resources to support business development and growth." While this definition is more narrowly focused on commercial processing than the various food hub definitions used in other jurisdictions, the Ministry is supportive of hubs offering other resources and services based on regional needs (though does not provide funding for other functions).

To date, the Ministry has supported feasibility studies in 16 communities, and provided implementation funding for 14 hubs. Of these 14 hubs, four are still in development and one is no longer operational.²

Many other food hubs are operational across BC, including some that operate as private businesses, and some operated by non-profit organizations that have secured funding through other avenues.

1. Government of BC. (2024, May 14). Food hubs in BC. www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/industry/agriculture-seafood/growbc-feedbc-buybc/bc-food-hub-network

2. Government of BC. (2024, May 9). What is a food hub? www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/industry/agriculture-seafood/growbc-feedbc-buybc/bc-food-hub-network/what-is-a-food-hub



THE BC FOOD HUB COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

As part of this project, the research team participated in the BC Food Hub Community of Practice (COP). The COP was initiated in 2023, following a needs assessment and two pilot sessions held in February and March 2023. Since then, the COP has met online, monthly, to discuss topics related to food hubs, learn from guest presenters, and connect with and support other members of the COP. These meetings were facilitated by Tapestry Collective Co-op, and funded by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food.

The COP has functioned as a critical platform for supporting collaboration and cross-network knowledge sharing, responding to the immediate needs of individual food hubs, and supporting the success of the BC Food Hub Network.

Membership in the COP was open to all BC-based commercial food hub operators, including Ministry-funded and non-Ministry-funded hubs, as well as to organizations interested in starting or in the process of launching a commercial food hub. By year two of the study, a total of 66 organizations had been invited to participate in the COP.

From the community of practice, two food hubs were selected for further exploration.



The Stir, Kamloops

The Stir is located in the South Interior of BC. This food hub offers facility rentals, business mentorship, and overall support to help entrepreneurs in reaching a larger market. The Stir has a fully equipped food processing facility, with a focus on preservation methods such as canning and dehydrating. Additionally, The Stir has a community space known as the Stirfront, which hosts workshops, events, a seed library, and serves as a pop-up retail and product pick-up point. The Stir also has a warehouse for aggregation and distribution. This food hub is a project of the Kamloops Food Policy Council, and is a provincially funded food hub.



Kootenay Farms Food Hub and Innovation Centre, Creston

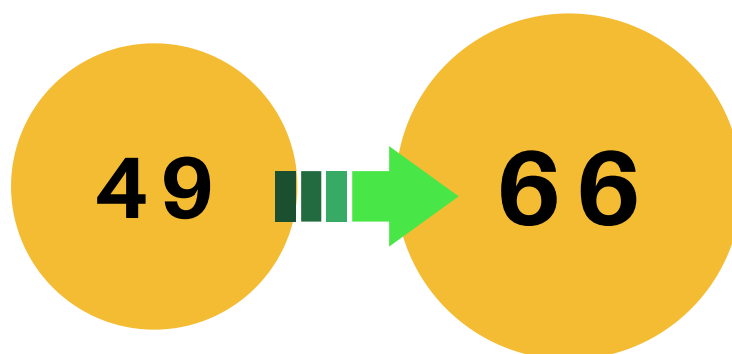
Located in the Central Kootenay, the Kootenay Farms Food Hub and Innovation Centre offers commercial Kitchen rental as well as access to equipment such as a commercial freeze dryer, packaging and labeling equipment, a flash pasteurizer and refrigeration and freezer storage. Alongside its equipment, its staff offers business development support. As a project of the Fields Forward Society, this provincially funded hub is dedicated to the development of a vibrant local agrifood system.

A 2025 SNAPSHOT OF FOOD HUBS IN BC

Using data collected through the Community of Practice (COP), we identified the different types of food hubs, their stages of development, and where they are located. However, it is important to recognize that food hubs are emerging in BC that extend beyond the COP and would not be reflected in this data.

In 2023, 49 organizations were invited to participate in the Community of Practice.

Other hubs were invited over time as they were identified.



TYPE

A mix of organizations attended COP meetings.

Type	Description	# of COP Hubs
Commercial Single Purpose	Primary function is as commercial kitchen/equipment space	28
Mixed Model	Blend of commercial space with social/community functions (food banks, rescue harvest, emergency food, etc.)	15
Other Food Organizations	Groups or organizations that have an interest in developing a food hub.	15

Other organizations also attended COP meetings, including academia, government, and industry support organizations.

LOCATION

Organizations as part of the COP network were located across BC, though some regions were more represented than others.

Food hubs exist across the province, but are concentrated in two regions; the Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island & the Gulf Islands. Northern BC is significantly underrepresented. This leaves a remote and under resourced portion of the province in a state of vulnerability, unable to benefit from the infrastructure of local food processing that a food hub can provide.

A 2025 SNAPSHOT OF FOOD HUBS IN BC

DEVELOPMENT STAGE

In the two year period of the study, several food hubs advanced through development stages.

STAGE	DESCRIPTION	# IN YEAR ONE	# IN YEAR TWO	CHANGE
Initiation	Business planning, seed funding secured or in progress	13	2	-11
In Development	Secured land/building, permits, purchase equipment, staffing	6	5	-1
Launch	Opening doors, attracting initial tenants, beginning to offer business services	2	1	-1
Operational, stage unknown	Operational but stage unknown	16	16	=
Early Growth	Client, product, and service build out, securing revenue streams	8	2	-6
Growth	Client, product, and service build out, securing revenue streams	5	5	=
Sustaining	Stable or adaptable income streams, supporting clients' business growth. Responding to emerging needs and changes in the financial climate.	4	12	+8
Discontinued	Organization did not move forward or hub is no longer operational	0	3	+3
Unknown	No data available	4	11	+7

Between year one and year two of the Community of Practice:

- **11 fewer hubs are in the initiation stage.** 2 of these hubs progressed in development stage, while 2 discontinued, and 7 became unknown.
- **7 hubs moved into an unknown development stage.** This means that the research team is no longer receiving data or updates on their development stage, due to these hubs not engaging with the COP.
- **8 more hubs became “sustaining”**

What does a “sustaining” food hub look like?

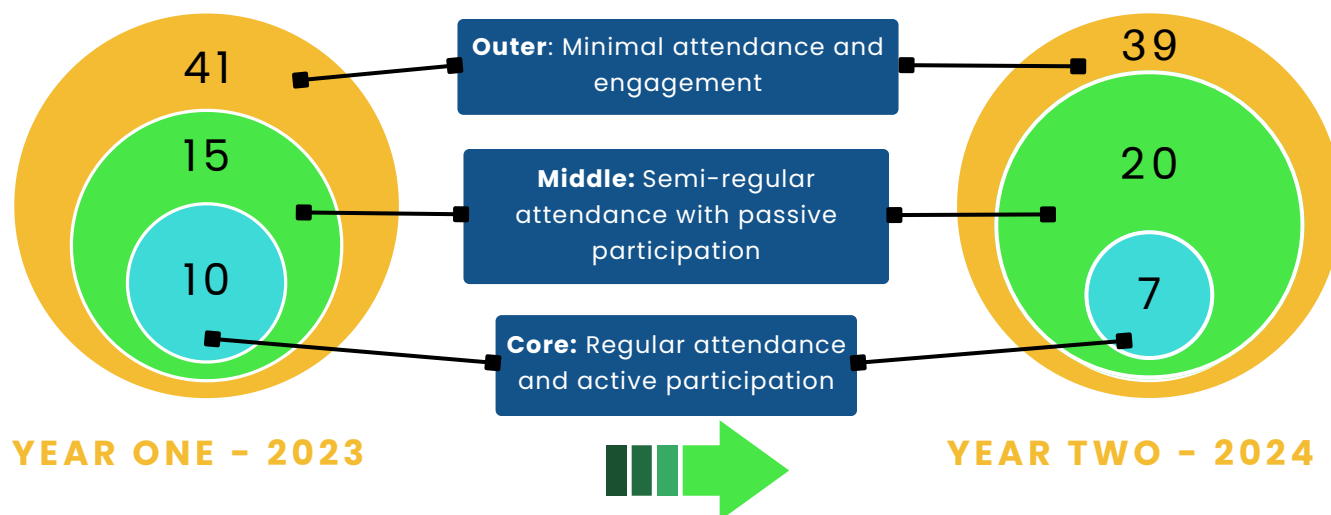
Originally we defined sustaining as “Steady income streams, supporting clients’ business growth. Responding to emerging needs as needed”. However, it became clear in year two that very few food hubs would meet this definition.

Based on our observations, characteristics of a sustaining food hub are:

- Stable in their structure and their capacity – they know how to run themselves and who their clients are.
- Adaptable in their income streams, although unlikely to have consistent and stable income, meaning they have some level of financial vulnerability.
- Meeting some of the existing and emerging needs of their surrounding region.
- May not yet be profitable, making them precarious, but they have the ability to adapt.

HOW HAS THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE CHANGED OVER TIME?

The level of COP member engagement changed over time.



The level of participation changed over the two years of the study, with the middle growing the most, taking from both the core and the outer groups.

One factor influencing participation was limited **staff capacity**. Some organizations who were originally in the core were no longer able to attend every session and therefore moved to the middle, potentially as a result of becoming overwhelmed with other duties. Simultaneously, the opposite occurred in other organizations, who moved into the middle from the outer circle, potentially due to increased capacity.

Another factor was **topic of discussion**, which was given to participants in advance, and may have influenced which meetings each organization chose to use their limited time to attend, depending on their interests.

WHO IS THE CORE NOW?

TYPE OF ORGANIZATION

- Two are commercial single purpose
- One is mixed model
- Four are other organizations

DEVELOPMENT STAGE

- One is in the growth stage
- One is under development
- One is sustaining
- Four are not food hubs, so this is not applicable

REGION

- One is from the Central Kootenays
- One is from the Lower Mainland
- Two are from the Central Interior
- One is from the Kootenay Boundary
- One is province-wide

WHAT DID WE FIND?

When analyzing the data we collected, we asked ourselves the following questions.

1. What role do food hubs currently play?
2. How do these roles match what is needed?
3. What role do food hubs want to play, in order to match needs of regions?
4. What is preventing food hubs from reaching this potential?

Question: What role do food hubs currently play?

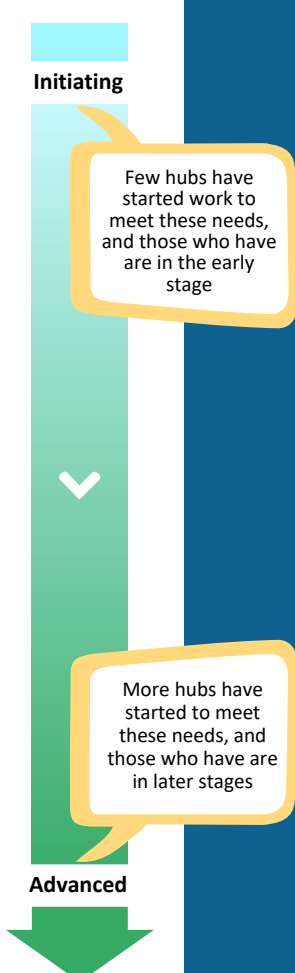
Currently, food hubs serve a wide range of roles within their regional food systems. The most common two roles are:

1. **Providing shared infrastructure.** This infrastructure may be a physical space like a commercial kitchen, but also space for events, retail, storage, or office space. Infrastructure also includes access to shared equipment such as commercial dehydrators or labeling machines.
2. **Supporting food businesses.** Beyond providing the space and equipment to enable processing, food hubs also offer other supports to food hub users. Food hubs offer business development services, enabling small scale business owners to move through incubation and scale-up at the food hub. Additionally, food hub users are able to receive both formal and informal mentorship, and guidance navigating a complex landscape of food safety regulations. Food hubs provide clients with the knowledge they need to be successful as a food business.

Other roles include:

- Reduced barriers to entry and upfront business startup costs
- Creating economies of scale
- Product testing & research
- Aggregation & distribution
- Retail
- Community development
- Platform for relationship building and collaboration
- Sharing knowledge amongst entrepreneurs
- Increasing access to local foods
- Enabling institutional buying
- Economic stimulus

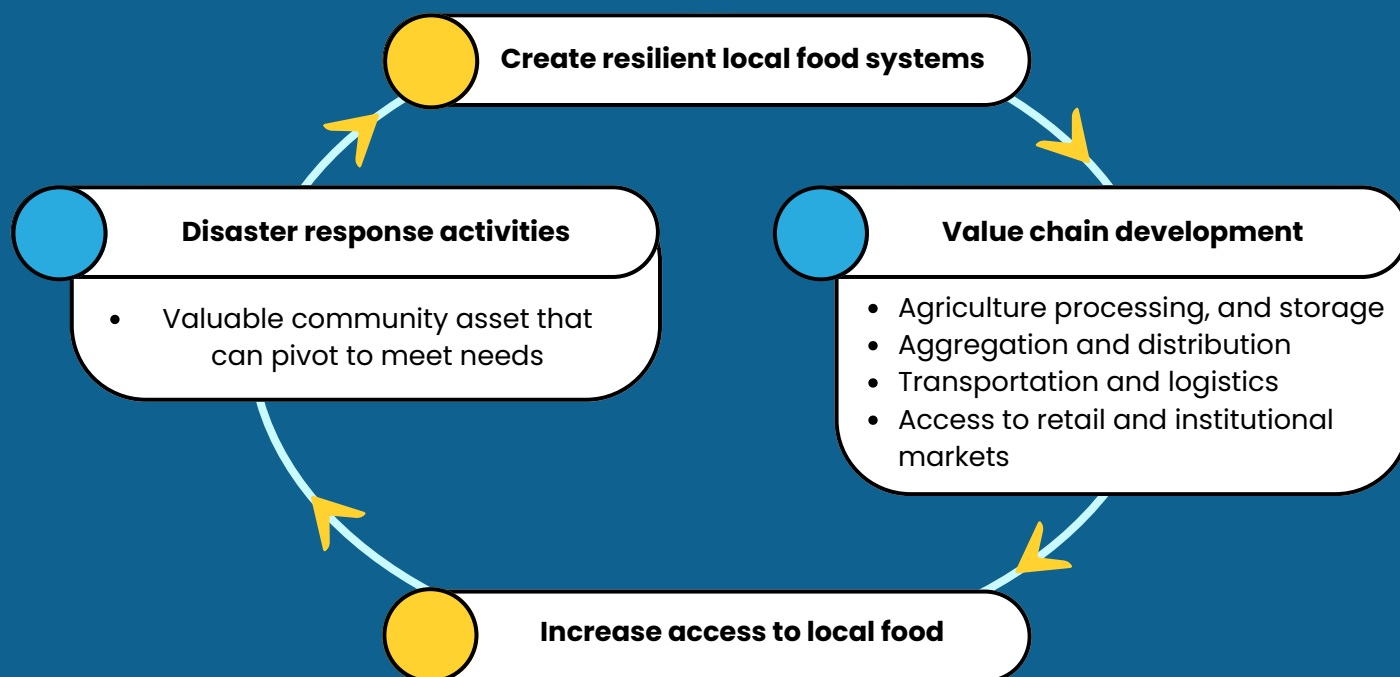
Question: How do these roles match what is needed?

Observed Common Community & Regional Needs	Observed Hub Actions Matching Needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for value chain development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Supporting primary producers and processors getting product to market through aggregation & distribution, transportation, logistics, and access to retail and institutional markets 	 <p>Initiating</p> <p>Few hubs have started work to meet these needs, and those who have are in the early stage</p> <p>✓</p> <p>More hubs have started to meet these needs, and those who have are in later stages</p> <p>Advanced</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for value-added processing opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Adding value to local primary agricultural products through farmer led or hub led processing 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for waste reduction in the food system <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Creating improved circular food systems through food waste recovery and effective use of surplus food 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for community development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Growing community assets, capacity, wellbeing and food security ◦ Creating economic growth & employment opportunities 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for infrastructure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Offering commercial kitchen facilities, shared equipment, and food storage space 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for food-sector specific business supports <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Providing support navigating existing system of multiple program & service providers ◦ Offering early stage supports with low barriers and minimal eligibility restrictions 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for collaboration & coordination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Established mechanisms for collaboration and coordination, used to differing degrees 	

The above table represents the most common needs that we observed across the data. These observations are generalized across hubs. However, the unique context of each community and region determines what is needed from each hub specifically. For example, a place-based factor determining local need may be the types of agricultural product produced. A region that primarily produces tree fruit may have different requirements than a region that primarily produces and processes seafood. Additionally, notable differences exist between urban and rural communities. This is due to both the population size that each hub can expect as a customer base, as well as the proximity and connectivity of the hub to other networks. The services that are currently offered or lacking within a community will also determine community need, as the food hub may move to fill any gaps.

Question: What roles do hubs want to play, in order to meet the needs of their regions?

We observed that food hubs would like to expand the roles that they play.



Food hubs aspire to fill a number of roles. These roles are interrelated and vary in their level of tangibility. Some roles, like disaster response and value chain development lead to visible and measurable progress, while improvements in access to local food and the resiliency of food systems are more difficult to quantify.

Among these aspirational roles, improving value chains is the most widely shared, and one that many food hubs have already begun working on. These activities may include aggregation and distribution activities at food hubs, and efforts to make food hubs key nodes within transportation and logistics networks. Food hubs may also act as sites of processing and storage, as well as extension activities. Ideally, these networks support producers in expanding local food access, opening new market opportunities, including retail and institutional markets like schools and hospitals.

The push for higher levels of regional self sufficiency in food is closely tied to the desire for a more resilient local and regional food system. Recent disasters and supply chain disruptions have underscored the vulnerabilities within local and regional food systems. As a result, food hubs are increasingly recognizing their potential to pivot and serve as an important community asset during times of crisis. While disaster response and preparedness activities are an emergent role and desired one, food hubs have yet taken concrete steps towards implementing this role.

In order to fulfill these roles, food hubs leverage both their physical and human capital, utilizing their physical infrastructure as well as their networks of people, to address food system needs.

Question: What is preventing food hubs from reaching this potential?

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Food hubs face challenges and pressures when it comes to fulfilling their aspirational roles. This is a summary of the most universal challenges, contrasted with food hub desires.

Challenge		Desires
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political pressures & expectations Funder desires & limitations 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Place-based needs Local priorities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Costs of operating facilities 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Costs that users can sustain
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competition 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaboration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of appropriate funding Prioritizing financial sustainability (best business case) The expectation that food hubs will be financially self-sustaining Limited operational capacity 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly desired but non-revenue generating activities Investment and stable income
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Traditional economic development 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community Economic Development & Food Security

Food hubs face several challenges that hinder their ability to fully realize their potential. As discussed, there are a number of place based needs and priorities that food hubs can address for their communities. However, these are not directly aligned with the mandate of food hubs as defined by the Ministry.

One significant barrier is the financial sustainability of food hubs. There is a discrepancy between what it costs to operate a food hub facility and what food hubs can actually generate in revenue, particularly in rural areas where the potential user base is smaller. If food hubs were to set user fees high enough to fully cover operating costs, they would likely price out the small-scale, emerging food businesses they aim to support.

To offset this discrepancy, food hubs generally rely on grants. However, grant funding shapes how food hubs operate and behave. Grant funding is often short term and project specific, rather than long term and operational. This can restrict hubs from acting in a manner that is strategic and long term. Additionally, competition for limited grants pits hubs against one another, reducing opportunities for collaboration. In many cases, local needs may not align with available grant funding, which can lead hubs to shift their scope to meet funder priorities. These scope expansions can take them beyond their limited financial and human capacity, and lead them in an unnecessary direction, potentially further away from fulfilling local needs. Funding impacts what food hubs are able to achieve, forcing hubs to make choices based upon what is the most financially viable, rather than what may be the most efficient, or the best fit for the community.

There is a deep tension within the underlying vision for food hubs. Certain actors see food hubs as a vehicle for economic development. This is consistent with the Ministry's vision, as the stated vision for the BC Food Hub Network is that it will be "Leading the world in food and beverage processing and innovation".¹ Furthermore, the stated mission is that the network is "Helping B.C.'s food and beverage businesses grow, innovate and commercialize".¹ This focus on traditional economic development may be at odds with achieving a more robust vision of a resilient food system.

1. Government of BC. (2024, May 14). BC Food Hub Network. www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/industry/agriculture-seafood/growbc-feedbc-buybc/bc-food-hub-network.

DISCUSSION

When we consider the findings described above all together, a story emerges from our data.



A NARROW FOCUS ON COMMERCIAL PROCESSING CREATES A DISCONNECT BETWEEN FOOD HUBS AND THE NEEDS OF LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

The role of food hubs, as defined and funded by the Ministry (see page 3) was narrow, and focused on shared-use food and beverage processing and business development support. The focus of the Ministry definition fits within the ecosystem of their related programs and policies. However, at the local level, the needs within the food system are broader. These broad needs are not new, and were identified in various feasibility studies leading up to the implementation of the BC Food Hub Network! Local ecosystems have areas of overlap and disconnection from the Provincial ecosystem.

There is a lack of a common overarching food systems vision and strategy that bridges the Provincial and local ecosystems. This meant that the narrow role for food hubs that the Ministry focused on within their definition did not have the breadth to be effectively incorporated at the local scale. This disjointed landscape has created challenges for food hubs.

Silos are a Problem

Consider all the policies, at all levels of government, that impact our food system. Ideally these policies would consider how they relate to other policies across our food system. However, the reality is that our food policies are divided among jurisdictions and geographies. This lack of integration is an issue between scales (e.g., local to provincial) and between organizations. Organizations like food hubs end up trying to work across multiple disjointed policy landscapes at the same time – a challenging task!

1. Government of BC. (2025, Jan 23). Food hubs in BC. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/industry/agriculture-seafood/growbc-feedbc-buybc/bc-food-hub-network/food-hubs-in-bc>.

The Complexity of Scale

Food systems are made up of multiple and overlapping communities and regions, each with common and unique needs. Food hubs operate within this complex and overlapping environment, which means that their functional scale can vary. For example, a "regional" food hub may in fact only serve a single community when it comes to physical space, but serve that community plus its surrounding region when it comes to mentorship. However, food hubs have geographic limits that are generally smaller than the larger "regions" we find in BC. We found that while food hubs are part of their surrounding regional food systems, to date they are not central components, in part due to their inability to i) meet multiple needs, and ii) to do so across the broader regional scale. This increases the importance of inter-organization collaboration and coordination to create positive redundancies within a region.



FOOD HUBS ARE MAKING AN EFFORT TO BE ADAPTABLE AND RESPONSIVE – BUT ARE CHALLENGED BY CONFLICTING PRESSURES

The roles that food hubs play within their communities and regions are not static, they will continue to shift as the surrounding food system evolves.

Currently there are two significant pressures that are driving how food hubs adapt and respond. First, they are responding to **what is needed locally** – the priorities and needs emerging within their communities and surrounding regions. Second, they are responding to **what is fundable** – in order for them to be able to operate. There is a disconnect between these pressures.

“

[People are not] even making a living wage because the organization that is doing all of this community work for the betterment of the community can't afford to pay them. And any of the grant cycles that come out, everything is so infrastructure related. It's either infrastructure or equipment improvements. – Interview Participant

”



FOOD HUBS REMAIN SITES OF UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

While food hubs acknowledge and consider the previously described roles, many of these roles are currently more aspirational than operational. Fulfilling all of these goals is an enormous task, one that is far beyond the capacity of food hubs and far beyond the budget that has been allotted to them. While food hubs can be a piece of a larger puzzle, they must be nested within a larger food system strategy to be effective. Additionally, they must somehow address the issue of financial capacity.

Food hubs have the potential to be important assets, both locally and provincially, but they must overcome a complex and multifaceted set of barriers before they can meet this potential.

The potential of food hubs is exciting and inspiring. It is important to both feed this hope and manage expectations. An initiative that balloons too quickly is likely to experience failure.

A site of potential



"...the bare bones of it is that it's a shared commercial kitchen. But it's just more expansive than that. It's like an emergent entity that is constantly shifting and evolving to just be positioned to act when we need it to act. To be a resource when we need it to be a resource. To be a community hub, when we need it to be a community hub. It is a complex network of relationships that is a true community resource. It is infrastructure that the community owns. And then it can be whatever we want it to be."

–Interview participant

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

For Practitioners

- **Explore diverse pathways to financial sustainability:** The road to financial sustainability includes a spectrum of approaches, from creating a strong business plan that leads to financial independence to cultivating relationships with funders that leads to predictable and long term funding.
- **Expand potential roles at the right pace:** Be realistic about what is achievable when expanding the scope and scale of food hub offerings. Explore new roles when existing roles are stable and well established.
- **Prioritize collaboration:** Food hubs must understand the local landscape, and their potential place in it. Working together ensures positive redundancies rather than chaotic duplication and unproductive competition.
- **Be based in place:** Hubs should be guided by their unique local capacity & priorities.

For Policymakers

- **Make strategic and integrated investments:** Rather than taking a siloed, narrow focus on economic growth in commercial processing, policymakers should acknowledge that food hubs have the potential to achieve systemic change and strategically invest funds (capital and operational) towards these broader benefits.
- **Listen to local needs to guide the vision:** Place based needs vary greatly across the province and can be in misalignment with a narrow mandate for food hubs. Community need and the best business case may be in conflict with one another. Forcing a vision that does not match the needs or realities at the local level will be ineffective.
- **Enable collaboration:** Food hubs exist as a piece of a larger puzzle towards building a resilient food system. Platforms for collaboration between hubs, and between hubs and other organizations in their local landscapes, should be supported. The BC Food Hub Network needs to be able to act as a true, self-directed network, and should be inclusive of hubs that see value in this collaboration, whether or not they have a primary focus on commercial processing.

For Researchers

- **Financial sustainability:** Further research is required to determine effective routes to financial sustainability and identify areas where public investment is most needed.
- **Aggregation and distribution:** As food hubs evolve to fill the role of aggregation and distribution within their region, further research is required to understand the potential of food hubs in filling this role, and any barriers they may face.
- **Persistence of Alternative Food Networks:** AFNs often struggle to survive, yet not long after their demise, tend to resurface, likely due to the fact that the needs that bring them into existence are strong and unwavering, yet also at direct odds with the dominant food system. Participatory research approaches can support communities with finding pathways through these tensions.

THANK YOU

This research would not have been possible without the participation of those within the Community of Practice, as well as the others who generously gave their time to participate in interviews. Thank you for sharing your experiences and insights.



Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen: sbreen@selkirk.ca

Dr. Lindsay Harris: lindsay@tapestryevaluation.com

Damon Chouinard: ed@ckfoodpolicy.ca

Caitlin Quist: cquist@selkirk.ca



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