What would 2020 have looked like if a collaborative network of research, engagement, and outreach across local and regional food system stakeholders, university researchers, and USDA leadership had been in place?” This is the question the Local and Regional Food System (LRFS) Recovery and Resilience project asks as the team reflects upon and examines the lessons, impacts, and successes of the first phase of the LRFS Response to COVID-19 project and frames its future mission. The project focuses on translating lessons learned from local food systems stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic and simultaneous social crisis into a specific, long-term collaborative strategy for fostering recovery, and equitable approaches to LRFS resilience. To achieve these goals the team will continue supporting:

- Fostering greater data efficacy and literacy by engaging project stakeholders in aggregating data and metrics from primary and secondary sources, completing a gap analysis of existing LRFS data, providing peer mentorship for collecting and assessment with LRFS Data and Metrics, and developing a data dashboard to increase accessibility to available data.
- Cross agency and sector learning, collaboration, and strategic action via a facilitated Network of Networks that convenes organizations leading LRFS stakeholder networks, university-based researchers, and USDA staff and leadership to share urgent and emergent issues, coordinate strategies and programming, and foster cross-stakeholder communication and collaboration.
- Synthesizing findings from data gathered and lessons learned into a Resilience Playbook to support policy makers, funders, and LRFS leaders.
- Producing publications, technical assistance, and outreach tools including sector snapshots, innovation briefs, cross-sectoral webinars, and data briefs.

While distinct in their focus, each key component of this project is designed to inform and reinforce the others. We are committed to continuing to build a robust collaborative that weaves together the different expertise and skills of our network members, illustrates the power of transparency and mutual accountability with project outputs, and creates a shared vision for how we can work together to build resilient, just, sustainable, and vibrant regional food systems.
DATA AND METRICS

Data and metrics to support understanding, planning, and evaluation of LRFS activities are evolving, and in siloed locations. As such, this component of the project will:

1. Create a data warehouse for timely compilation of secondary, primary, and innovative indicators of LRFS assets, health, and dynamics;
2. Co-create strategies for collaborative data collection and analysis that provide timely insights for LRFS sectoral and cross-sectoral market phenomena;
3. Organize a sustained cross-sectoral data and metrics community of collaboration to highlight how data are being used – including innovation methods for sharing and analysis of LRFS cross-sectoral data; and,
4. Improve understanding and usage of data through interviews with partner organizations

By the end of the 2.0 project, the goal of this work is to ensure that academic, practitioner, and policymaker partners will have access to more comprehensive data on LRFS as well as tools to support rapid adoption of innovative metrics for efficient planning and evaluation to support response to future disruptions and catalyze opportunities. Additionally, project partners will identify and clarify priorities to address gaps in LRFS data collection.
NETWORK OF NETWORKS

There are a great number of high-impact organizations that serve LRFS stakeholders at the ground level. Many of these organizations often serve as network leaders acting as representatives for the collective voices of sector or stakeholder specific groups and facilitating collaboration and communication across independent actors. Focusing on sector or stakeholder specific issues, these network organizations are well positioned to understand and address those specific needs. However, an unexpected finding from the first year of the LRFS Response to COVID-19 project was the practical value of cross-sector convenings. We found that our cross-sector network provided a reliable space to identify and address shared issues, develop novel collaborative strategies across previously disconnected sectors, and was a easy-to-access point of inquiry for governmental policy and program leaders seeking to understand and address LRFS issues.

RESILIENCE PLAYBOOK

An important outcome of this component of the project will be a collection of recommendations, resources, and case studies compiled into a multi-media resource called the Resilience Playbook. This resource will provide LRFS leaders with guidance on best practices for “staying ready” for future disruptions to the food system. Collaborating organizations, university researchers and USDA team members will capture lessons learned about LRFS resilience during the pandemic and translate those insights into readily accessible and actionable resources and educational materials for sector leaders, food policy councils, policy makers, and funders. The playbook will also contain a set of recommendations based on experiences from LRFS practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic – including input and experiences for existing programs, policies and funding opportunities, or for the creation of new ones.

Focused on four broad sectors within LRFS (direct to consumer, farm to institution, retail/restaurant, and non-commodity foods), the playbook will provide recommendations for effective strategies for supporting and leveraging LRFS in 1) preparation for a disaster/disruption, 2) timely and appropriate response to disaster/disruption and, 3) mid- and long-term strategies for fostering equitable, inclusive, and resilient local and regional food systems.