



Farmers Market Organizations Are More Than Markets



Key Findings

- A farmers market is more than an event.
- Farmers market organizations manage farmers market operations, including day-of-market activities, but also have many other functions including risk management, partnership development and business operations.
- A farmers market organization may operate one market or multiple markets, and have different kinds of business structures. In addition, a farmers market may be managed by an umbrella organization for which the market itself is a program.
- Farmers market organizations are often supported by additional organizations at both the state and national levels. These groups have deep knowledge of how the sector works and the interlocking parts which comprise it.

Study Purpose

The goal of the “Analyzing the Diversity and Impacts of Farmers Markets Managed by Organizations” cooperative research agreement was to increase the general public’s understanding of the diverse forms that farmers markets in the United States take and the breadth of their activities. The project was conducted over two years (October 2022 to September 2024) and used mixed methods (an online environmental scan, listening sessions, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews) to explore the structures, activities, impacts and trends shaping farmers market organizations.

What Is a Farmers Market Organization?

This project defined it as an entity that manages the operations and administration of one or more farmers market events on a recurring basis.¹

¹ The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service defines a farmers market as a recurring gathering of two or more farmvendors selling agricultural products directly to consumers at a common location.



Farmers Market Organizations Do More Than Run Farmers Markets

Farmers markets take place in certain places during certain times, but these locations don't show the full effort and influence of farmers market organizations. Farmers markets can sometimes be seen as special events, however, "anybody who's thrown a party or planned a wedding knows how much work went into that in the background. And that is the organization" (Interview 71). Organizations take diverse roles, like:

- developing market mission,
- vision and strategy;
- creating and enacting partnerships outside of the market;
- undertaking advocacy with municipal leaders, public health agencies, other NGOs and market vendors;
- navigating the legal rules, physical infrastructures, and evolving technologies that allow markets to take place.

 Non-profit Organization

 Limited Liability Company (LLC)

 Municipal Entity

Many Kinds of Organizations Manage Markets

Market organizations vary in their organizational structure (e.g., a non-profit organization, LLC or municipal entity) as well as organizational type (e.g., an organization whose primary work is to manage multiple farmers markets as compared to a city government or university that runs the market as a program).

Market Typologies Help Make Sense of the Diverse Farmers Market Sector

Given the diversity of the sector, various groups have created tools to identify types of farmers markets. Experts we interviewed suggested that a typology could help:

- 1 Organize understandings of diverse markets;
- 2 Provide a foundation for understanding the variables that contribute to differences in market focus, operations, organizations, and outcomes;
- 3 Allow individual markets to benchmark themselves against similar markets;
- 4 Capture the broad diversity of markets' goals.



Temporary tattoo given to farmers market shoppers.



Reviewing Three Typologies

Farmers Market Coalition Market Clusters

The researchers found that the most familiar existing market typology was the [market clusters framework](#) developed by Farmers Market Coalition.² In this typology, each market cluster has a different focus which manifests across all aspects of their operations. Focus is not determined by the business structure of the market: a non-profit corporation could run either a flagship market or an activator market. Across these market types, Farmers Market Coalition stresses that the mission, management, measurement and messaging all differ, though all markets make decisions across these four areas.

Project for Public Spaces Forms of Markets MARKET LADDER

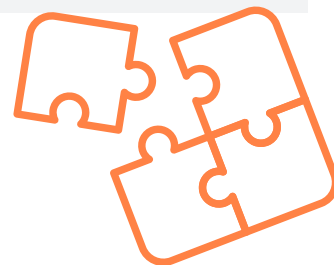
Another typology is the [Project for Public Spaces \(PPS\) Market Cities Program](#), which is developing a network of market operators across this evolutionary ladder so that they can learn from each other in order to advance “communities rooted in well-being and equitable opportunity” (PPS 2024). Within this framework, markets are seen as progressing from street vendors to tent markets to shed markets and potentially toward indoor public markets or market districts. This typology helps to fit farmers markets into a broader arena of markets, but is less useful for understanding the diversity of farmers markets and the organizations that run them.

Market Origin Stories’ Impact on Organizations

Other participants organized their understanding of the sector by thinking about what era a farmers market originated within. This concept showed up in several interviews as participants reflected on changes in the focus of who was starting farmers markets overtime, and to what end. One interviewee confidently identified five eras of farmers market origins: back-to-landers, neighborhood leaders, mainstreet markets, public health sector, and justice-movement markets.³

Challenges of Creating Market Typologies

Most participants were unfamiliar with these typologies, but many agreed a typology could be useful. Creating a typology will face challenges including:



- 1 Existing typologies do not speak to each other and are not widely shared;
- 2 The possibility of rigid typologies accidentally precluding emergent market activities. For example, current typologies do not account for markets that include online sales channels or CSA box programs. Any new typology should prioritize flexibility over rigid categories. A typology should not be used to categorize markets in ways that qualify or disqualify them for specific kinds of funding, for example.

² Farmers Market Coalition. (2019). “Strengthening Pittsburgh’s Farmers Markets.” Retrieved from https://farmersmarketcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/gravity_forms/1-66fc51da018bd946fb1dfb74f4bea1e7/2019/03/Pittsburgh_FarmersMarkets_Jan2019FINAL.pdf. October 28, 2024.

³ At the time of writing this report, Darlene Wolnik at Farmers Market Coalition is working on a project to explore these eras by collecting origin stories of markets across the United States.



Important Variables for a Typology⁴

Farmers Market Elements Proposed for Inclusion in Future Typologies	
Typology Element	Potential Measures
Multi- or single-market organization	Number in network
Business structure	Legal destination
Market age	Year founded
Market size	Number of peak season vendors Number of off-season vendors
Organizational professionalization	Paid manager Year-round staff Succession plan
Market location	Rural/urban continuum code Census tract or county demographics

Interview 35

“Not all markets are going to fit in only one type, or there might be a type that’s missing... [a typology should not be] wielded as a weapon to put markets only in one category, or to force them into an existing category.”



Ideas for Future Research

Market typologies can be useful guides for market organizations and those that support them. An updated farmers market typology should be co-developed and ground truthed with sector stakeholders.



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⁴ Compiled from recommendations given in interviews and focus groups conducted for this project.