

# **Community-Based Policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**Implications for Extension and Obesity  
Programs**

# Organizing Thoughts

1. Obesity issues are extraordinarily complex, ranging from personal decisions and locally built environments to macro-social and economic factors.
2. Arenas for federal social and economic policies are undergoing qualitative changes toward decentralization of programs – often referred to as *devolution*.

# Organizing Thoughts

3. To the extent that obesity issues are associated with the food system, the qualitative shift underway from a **supply-driven** to a **demand-driven global food system** may involve important policy opportunities.
4. For a variety of reasons, Cooperative Extension Services are considering or have begun shifting scarce resources toward social issues and movements associated with the food system.

# Devolution and Demand Driven Agriculture

Two late 20<sup>th</sup> century trends may shape policy opportunities for a wide range of public policies that confront unique complexities of local societies.

1. Federal trend toward decentralizing funding and authority for federal programs -- *Devolution*.
2. Shift of global food systems from supply-driven to demand driven.

What follows are over-simplified presentations of topics that require a great deal more explanation.

What constitutes place-based/community-based federal policies?

Just about any policy that connects the federal program to a local entity.

Extension is a type of county-based program where funding is shared by federal, state, and local governments and managed by an LGU.

I will focus on one of the most successful New Deal models for federal, state, and local programmatic partnerships.

# The Associative State:

## Experiments in Federal and Local Partnerships

- The rapid expansion of USDA during the New Deal was made possible by a partnership between the Roosevelt Administration and Congress that shared decisions on the distribution of federal benefits with local boards (AAA, ASCS, FSA).
- Historians refer to this as the *Associative State*. This federal-local partnership solved the problem of a national political culture of distrust toward a powerful central government.

## Devolution (late 1980s – the present)

Devolution represents a partial turn toward an associative state federal partnership with the states (but not with local governments except through their states).

- Decentralization of Federal Programs

*The Good: making programs more relevant at the local level*

*The Bad: fewer financial resources and almost no administrative costs (internalization of costs)  
-- with de facto unfunded mandates.*

- USDA farm programs were successful because they gained local political legitimacy of farmers through the authority of county-based boards – AAA, ASCS, FSA – *in part because they tapped and empowered local social networks.*
- A policy lesson is that political legitimacy can be gained through an associative state (federal-local partnership) model for nutrition programs – but there needs to be fiscal benefits for local efforts in order to create local demand for federal programs in Congress.
- This policy model can create a “political will” that will protect the programs from long-term ebbs and flows of American politics (witness the current commodity programs).

- The power of the Associative State model, when sufficient funding is present and there is the simultaneous creation of political interest groups (such as commodity groups) to support continued funding, is historically impressive.

Decentralization holds open the possibility for a policy shift toward associative state programmatic structures that empower communities.

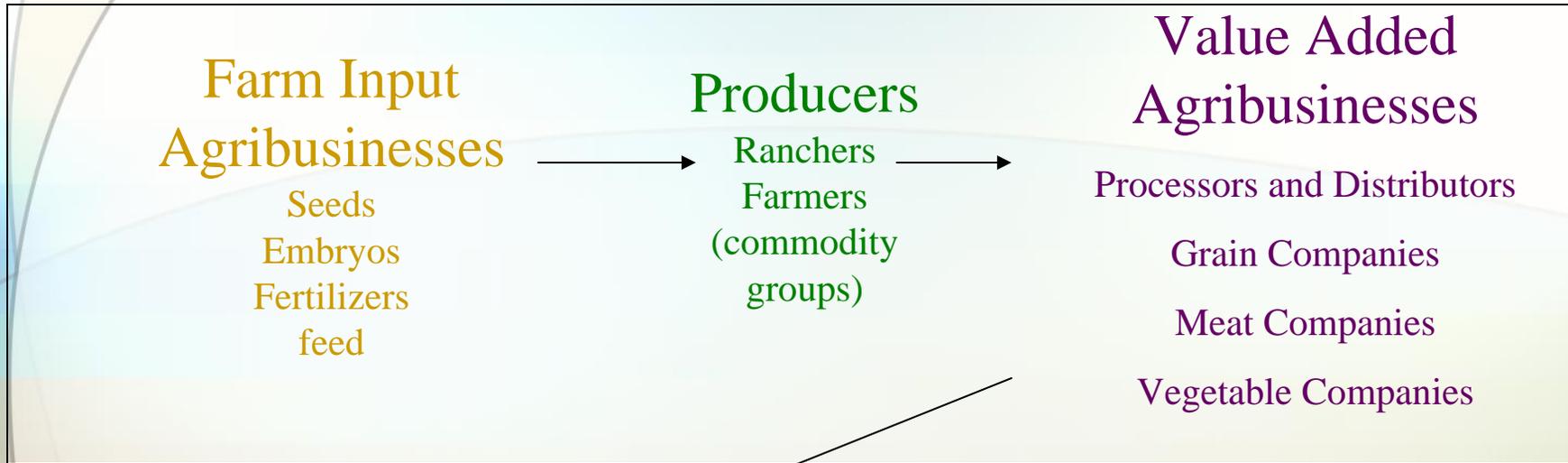
In turn, this holds open the possibility for a federal food and nutrition program that is empowered by communities that share in program implementation.



Shift from supply-driven to demand driven  
food systems.

Larry Busch – Michigan State University

# Supply Driven Commodity Chain



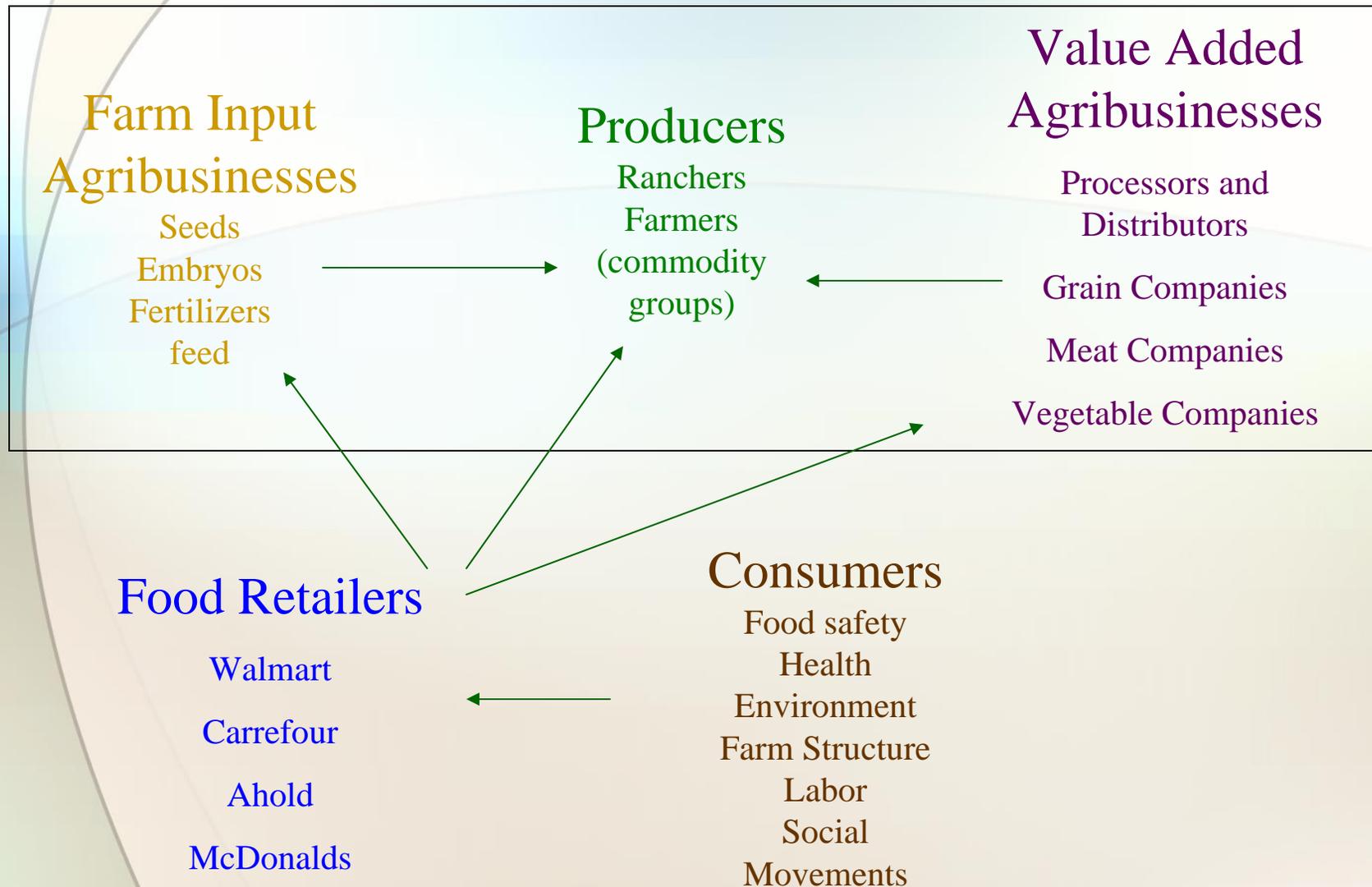
## Food Retailers

Walmart  
Carrefour  
Ahold  
McDonalds

## Consumers

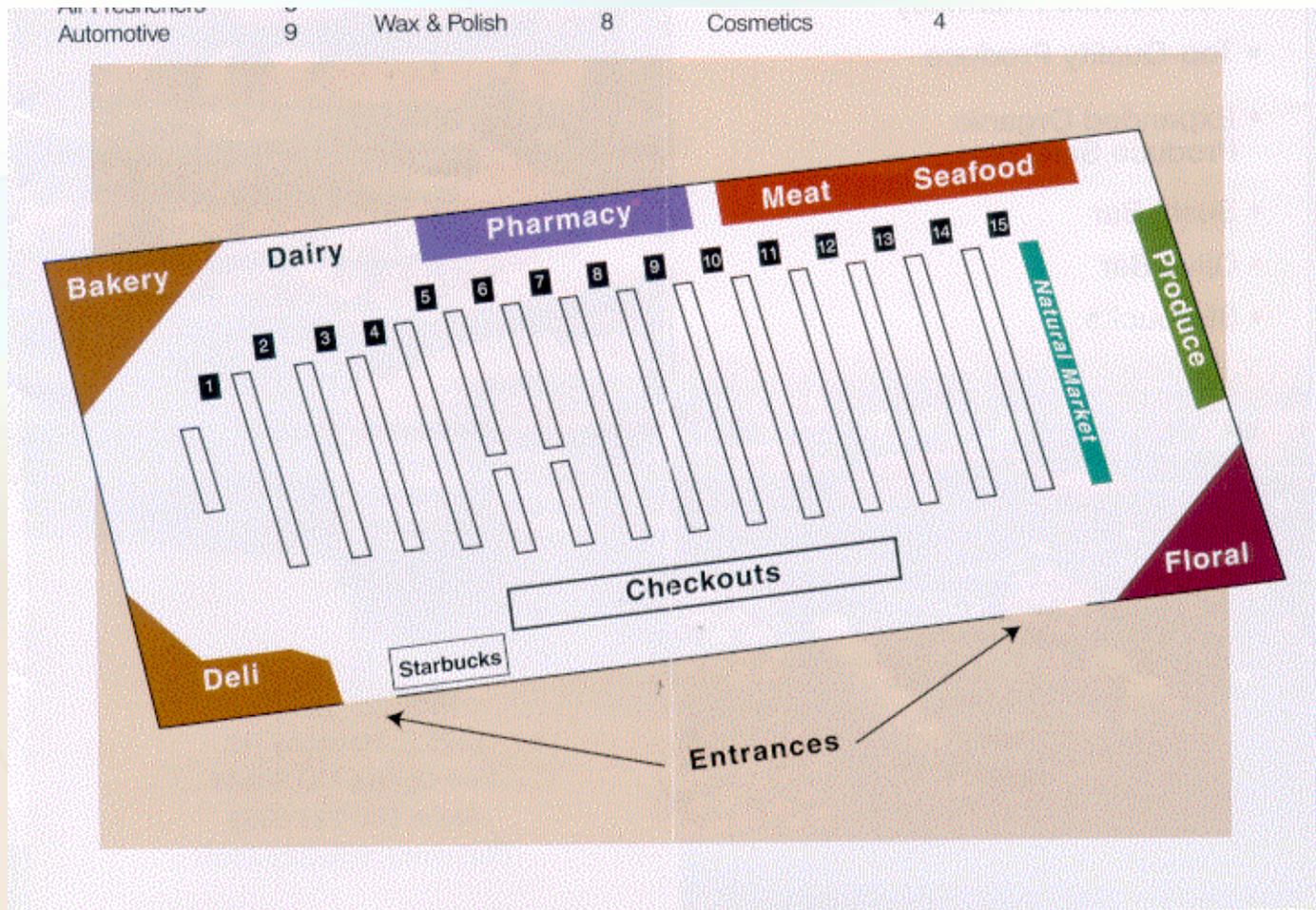
Food safety  
Health  
Environment  
Farm Structure  
Labor  
Social Movements

# Demand Driven Commodity Chain



- These changes are evident in the increasing capacity for retail food institutions (super markets and fast food firms) to facilitate their expanding global market power, **characterized by fiercely competitive highly concentrated (oligopoly) markets, by paying attention to consumers' social values and marginal consumption patterns.**
- As the global economic power of food retailers increase, their market strategies and risk adverse behavior are passed back along the commodity chain of suppliers.

# Light and Dark Areas of a Food Retailer: Where Profits Are Made



- Supermarkets remain locked in fierce competition, but in oligopolistic markets. Therefore, their rate of profit is extraordinarily low, making retailers sensitive to small fluctuations in demand.

- As a result, new social movements (e.g., consumer, environmental, animal rights, worker safety organizations, etc.) have been able to leverage their concerns to a far greater degree than in the past. . .

. . . and, as this leverage becomes more apparent, this market power, *down to the local level*, can be leveraged for both private sector and public policy purposes.

- The power of consumers to express social, health, and nutritional values through their consumption patterns are changing direct market strategies of food retailers.
- These changes are shifting the relationships among producers, suppliers, and consumers toward consumers and their direct consumption in the stores of food retailers and fast food vendors.

- Consumer interests, which are in many ways very different from those of traditional stakeholders for agricultural researchers and extension, also will be exerted through political processes on public research funding which in turn will reshape research priorities.
- Institutions committed to agricultural research and extension, particularly LGUs, may accordingly restructure their priorities or become further distanced from the direct consumers of agriculture products.

- The unique relevancy of the LGUs will decline to the extent that their research and extension programs cannot be differentiated from those of other public and private institutions.
- If public research and extension institutions are successful in recognizing the opportunities of these sea changes they will be equally successful in cobbling together new public legitimacy for and therefore new resources for their research and educational enterprises.
- How communities are integrated as partners in determining institutional priorities may be a critical factor in the longer term legitimacy of LGUs.

These challenges will be informed by broader cultural considerations of stewardship, equity, and democracy as research and extension priorities are determined through public dialogue and partnerships negotiated with central city neighborhoods, suburbs, and rural communities.

Issues associated with obesity, particularly childhood obesity, seem well positioned to take advantage of this shift toward consumer concerns.

## Possibilities for Community-based Policy and Childhood Obesity

Obesity (as you already know) is a complex social issue in both causes and solutions.

This issue seems particularly suited for community based policies given the need for local societies to take responsibility for practices and policies in their immediate environment.

After all, individual human choices are mediated by the interaction of social forces such as markets, cultural patterns, history, social class, and family practices, *all occur at the local level.*

Therefore, policies charged with changing behaviors require change in the rewards and motivators driving behaviors.

## Possibilities for Community-based Policy and Obesity

If these assumptions are reasonable, then the following questions should be address:

- How can norms of what is acceptable be altered through public discourse and other appropriate means of policy development?
- What methods of policy development can be effectively used by communities to create an environment of support for changing behaviors?

## Possibilities for Community-based Policy and Obesity

- Why is this more important than waiting for the big federal policy solution?
- What is the true power of consumer driven agriculture in our current world?

A final query focuses on what can the Land Grant University contribute to this process . . .

. . . . and . . .

what does this mean about the changing role and structure of Cooperative Extension and higher education?

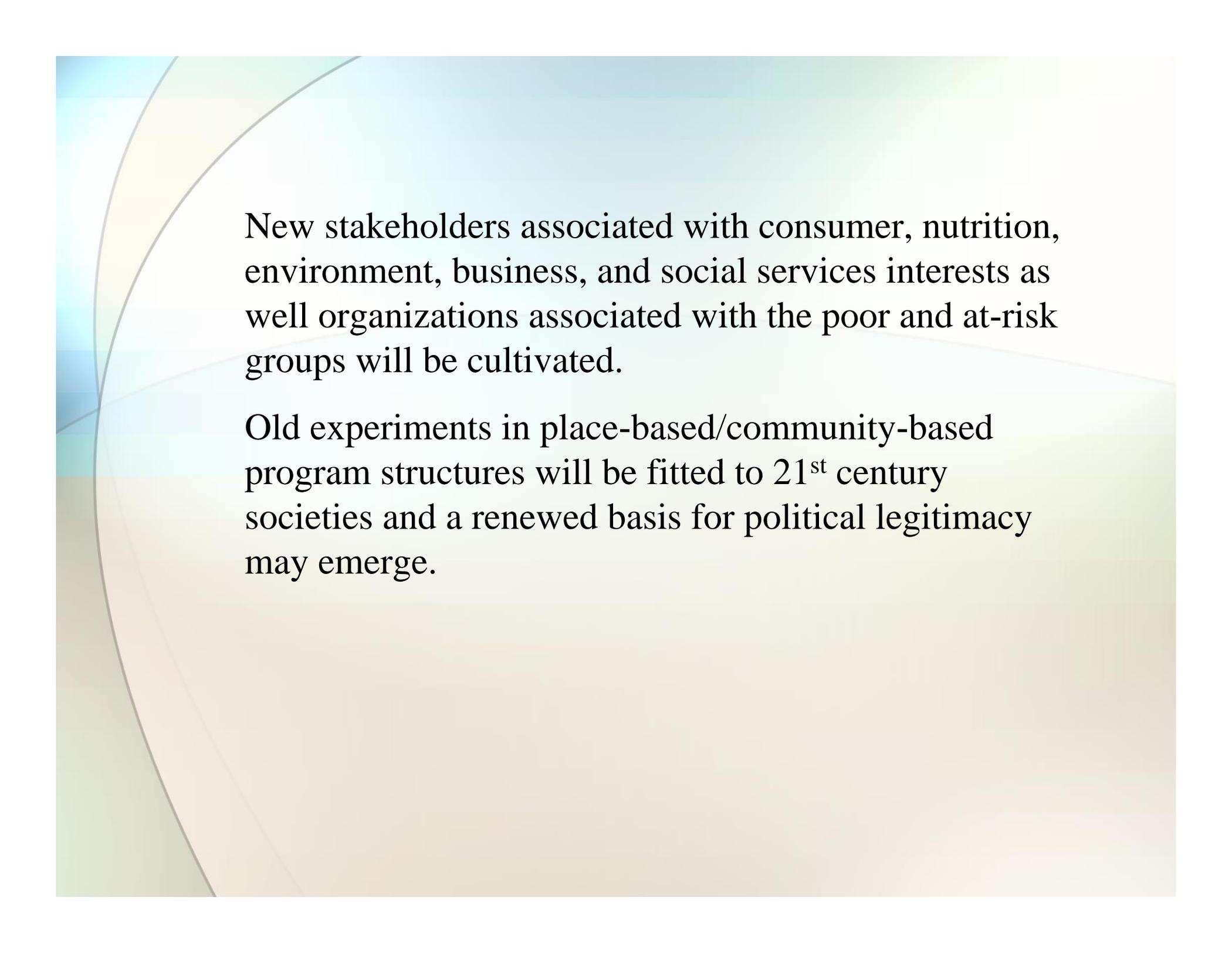
I would like to propose the following:

1. The associative state model has intuitive culture significance in a society profoundly suspicious of a strong centralized government.
2. The complexity and locality specific character of obesity does not lend itself to a singular federal initiative – rather partnerships with states and their communities and neighborhoods can make the goals of federal programs locally meaningful and effective.
3. Local partnerships need to be holistic. This means that other concerns such as jobs, entrepreneurship, other health care issues, public safety, and other local issues need to be simultaneously integrated.

4. The Land Grant Universities are collectively and independently reinventing themselves: many are asking the question, were the LGU system begun today what would it look like?

I doubt that it would look like it does.

As each LGU reinvents itself to meet the needs of its particular state new stakeholders will be brought in while not forsaking those who have supported them for 75 years – this is not a zero-sum process.



New stakeholders associated with consumer, nutrition, environment, business, and social services interests as well organizations associated with the poor and at-risk groups will be cultivated.

Old experiments in place-based/community-based program structures will be fitted to 21<sup>st</sup> century societies and a renewed basis for political legitimacy may emerge.

5. A demand driven global food system presents both liabilities and opportunities, *we need to identify both.*

Some of these opportunities exist at the local level, even with some of the largest food retailers.

# Old Wine in New Bottles: themes for locally initiated development

## *Value-based policy themes relative to local policy initiatives*

1. democracy;
2. local initiative;
3. civility and tolerance of our neighbors;
4. the value of community as a social formation to address common needs and policy initiatives to enhance social infrastructure.

Both the community-based federal policy  
and the emerging demand-driven global food  
system are worthy of our consideration.

Thanks!