



# Farm to Institution New England

## Building A Network

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# Overview

## Purpose, and Background of This Report

This report was developed to tell the story of Farm to Institution New England (FINE) and to better understand how network organizations can be an effective means for change. The Consensus Building Institute (CBI) prepared this report, drawing on interviews with staff, FINE's leadership team, funders, and partner institutions that work closely with FINE and internal documents shared by FINE as well as internal documents shared by FINE. This report will not only showcase the important work that FINE is doing, but makes an argument that building strong networks for cross-organizational information sharing and collaborative work has value. While we are confident that network organizations can play a powerful role, we also want to recognize how difficult and time consuming creating a network can be. Therefore, this report will focus on some of the key lessons we can learn from FINE's evolution. CBI would like to thank FINE and the many individuals we spoke with for sharing their story with us. Any errors or omissions are the sole responsibility of CBI.

## Farm to Institution New England

FINE is a network organization that brings together non-profit, public, and private entities from the six New England states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont. FINE's goal is to "work collaboratively to strengthen [New England's] food system by increasing the amount of New England-grown and processed food served in [the] region's schools, healthcare facilities, colleges and other institutions." The network was first launched in 2010 as part of a joint initiative of the Regional Steering Committee (RSC) of the National Farm to School Network and as a collaboration of the New England agricultural commissioners.

FINE provides an opportunity to identify and connect important players in order to create opportunities to serve local food in New England institutions. It provides a forum for those players to collaborate, share ideas, and offer support to one another in order to achieve their collective interest. It is a momentum producing force that can showcase and advertise achievements in the farm to institution movement. It can share best practices and lessons learned, and convene conversations to ensure the farm to institution movement continues to make progress. FINE has also played the role of providing necessary research and supporting pilot projects that fill in gaps and uncertainties in the farm to institution value chain that might otherwise be outside the purview of any single institution, state, or organization.

# The Principles of Network Organizations

Scholars and practitioners alike are coming to recognize the value that network organizations can offer. While individuals and organizations are working tirelessly to address social, environmental, and economic problems, there is only so much that any single entity can do on its own. Large issues such as poverty, crime, and climate change must involve many players to make a social impact. Even more, many problems are the result of silos or fragmentation between existing organizations. For example, a city's transportation system may deteriorate or not function efficiently because the municipal government, state, public transit authority, and the federal government each have distinct but interconnected control of certain roads, rail-lines, and highways. If the necessary entities are not working together to allocate the resources and prioritize maintenance, the entire system can stall. Networks can bring the right players to the table and create efficiency by looking at the whole value chain rather than small segments of it.

Easterling (2012) defines a network as “a set of relationships among a group of ‘members’—individuals or organizations” who “interact with one another in ways that confer mutual benefit” (59). Specifically, networks allow people to identify their common goals, share information to better understand what it will take to achieve those goals, and create a framework by which to pursue those common interests. Networks connect diverse groups that have potentially complementary resources and knowledge that broadens the scope of what is possible. Since the rise of the Internet, networks are taking on different and changing forms. Facilitating collaboration across geographic boundaries and between individuals sitting in different offices is much easier. Therefore, today there are ever-increasing opportunities to forge these bonds.

Kania and Kramer (2011) find that funders often overlook network type organizations, instead looking for organizations that are having the most isolated impact in their field. This has unintended negative consequences because it puts would-be partner organizations in conflict with one-another to come up with the next best intervention. Instead they suggest, if funders supported network organizations they could support collective impact efforts that have the potential to be much more powerful. Unfortunately, building a network organization takes time and requires funders to have patience.

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Beyond funding, networks face other challenges. Members may drop out if they no longer see value in participating, leadership can easily devolve and become ineffective without paid staff, ties to important partners can be tenuous if key employees change jobs, networking may feel too “relational” and lack clearer, specific, substantive outcomes, and interest in the subject matter can be short lived or episodic. As such, scholars have sought to answer the important question of what makes networks sustainable over time and effective at achieving real changes for their members.

Kania and Kramer identify five conditions for success: 1) A common agenda – all participants must have a shared vision, a similar understanding of the problem, and agreed upon approach to solving it; 2) Shared measurement – meaning that the network must agree on how to measure, report, and evaluate progress. This is essential for holding members accountable, but also necessary in order to document progress; 3) Mutually reinforcing activities – all participating groups should take responsibility for the activities at which they excel in coordination with the action of others; 4) Continuous communication – participants must know what others are doing, share a common vocabulary to describe their work, and know how to get needed support; and 5) Backbone support organizations – networks do best when there are committed staff who create the infrastructure for ongoing facilitation, communication, data collection and reporting, and dealing with logistical and administrative needs.

# History of FINE

Fine began as a local collaboration of individuals and organizations who were interested in farm to institution issues. FINE grew out of the Farm to School (FtS) movement. Prior to 2007, Farm to School activities had begun in several New England states, but there were no formal efforts at collaborating across state lines. In the spring of 2007 the Community Food Security Coalition and the Center for Food Justice established a National Farm to School (NFtS) network that bridged efforts to bring local food and agriculture education into schools across the country. The NFtS network created a new organizational structure across the country. They divided the nation into eight regions, and selected a Regional Lead Agency (RLA) to coordinate regional efforts and share information and resources across the region. Within each state they selected State Leads who coordinated farm to school efforts in that state.

In the summer of 2007, the Northeast States selected Coastal Enterprises Inc. from Wiscasset, Maine and Shelburne Farms from Shelburne, Vermont to serve as the Co-Regional Lead Agency for the seven (7) Northeast States. Soon after, the region convened a regional steering committee (RSC) to help share information and guide regional collaboration. Dana Hudson from Shelburne Farms served as the lead staff member for the RSC and was in charge of identifying the key people who would want to be part of the FtS conversation. In the next few years, the RSC held a number of regional conferences and workshops that brought various stakeholders together to build camaraderie, share best practices, and create a shared vision. From this work, a core group of leaders emerged who began to work closely together to support each other. This group built a strong trusting working relationship, realizing that together they could achieve much more than on their own.

In 2010 the group was invited to a meeting of the New England Governors and the Chief Agricultural Officers of the six New England states. Hudson and her team presented on FtS. They made the case that if New England public schools spent as little as 5% of their food budget on locally sourced food, it could generate millions for the states. Based on this meeting, the Agricultural Officers identified five long-term priorities for the region. One of these was developing farm to school, college, and healthcare initiatives. As such, they asked Hudson to present at a wider regional meeting and lobby for additional funding in November 2010. The FtS team recognized that they were less prepared to support farm to college and farm to healthcare initiatives given the current design and mission of the FtS RSC. At the meeting Hudson argued that the region needed a broader farm to institution program, but that they needed \$1 million to support this effort. Shortly afterwards USDA agreed to grant \$250,000 to support farm to institution work and challenged other organizations to match their award.

As a result, FINE was officially launched as a joint initiative between the RSC of the NFtS Network and the New England agricultural commissioners. During the early years, FINE was tightly linked to the FtS network, and was set up as a project under the regional RSC. However,

after incorporating more partners from health care facilities and colleges, it became clear that a more robust organizational structure would be necessary to keep up with the amount of work required. Breaking official ties with the FtS regional RSC did lead to some growing pains. However, setting what would be a long-term precedent for FINE, the organization did not shy away from the debate and engaged honestly in conversations about how the two organizations should interrelate. The separation meant that representatives from organizations, who often did not have the time or capacity to commit to both FtS and FINE, had to decide which they wanted to prioritize. If they decided to remain part of the FtS team, FINE needed to identify a different state representative. If they wanted to become more involved in FINE, the FtS team had to find someone to take on their role within FtS. Eventually the two groups were able to reorganize into two distinct entities that continue to function in close partnerships with one another. Importantly, a spot for the NfTs RLA remains the only designated slot on the FINE leadership team ensuring that this relationship will remain strong.

FINE has made significant progress since it was first imagined in 2010 and is now an independent network with funded project leads and members. FINE has four independent consultants who serve as “staff” members (ranging from 50% - 80% full-time equivalent). FINE also has a more established and eight member leadership team. It is active in farm to school, farm to college, and farm to health care efforts. As would be expected, FINE continues to grow and evolve as it matures and becomes more adept at identifying its strategic position to provide value.



# What Kind of Network is FINE?

Plastrik et. al (2014) argue that to truly understand a network, it is important to look at the explicit and implicit decisions that networks make regarding five key features: its purpose, membership, value propositions, governance and operating principles. This provides a framework for describing FINE's organizational design and describing the potential decisions the leadership at FINE will need to make moving forward.

## Purpose

Plastrik et al. feel that a social-impact network must have a purpose that members collectively agree upon. If the mission "is being driven by staff or an outsider's purpose" (169), then the organization is not a network, but rather an association that may provide members with services. Participants should not only agree upon the substantive purpose of the network, but also the function of the network. Is its main objective to help members connect to one another? Is it to facilitate joint projects? Is it to align member's objectives to enhance efficiency? Does it do all of these?

What is FINE's purpose? In a few words, it is to strengthen New England's food system by increasing local foods in schools, health care institutions, colleges and other institutions. FINE does this by connecting groups with a pre-existing interest in this mission, creating opportunities for advocates to interact with necessary stakeholders that can grow interest in the mission, and conducting research to better understand the hurdles and opportunities to achieve this mission.

FINE has an agreed upon vision and mission that any participant can easily find on their website. This mission describes a very specific theory of change. If New England can function as a region and identify multiple institutions with significant purchasing power, that purchasing power can be leveraged to support more local farmers and economies. Members of the leadership team I spoke with defined the change they hoped to see as both economic and systemic. Economically, directing the purchasing power of institutions to local products can be a boon to the local farm industry and further enrich the region. Systemically, by creating interest in local farmed goods from a number of institutions, FINE hopes that it can encourage the supply chain to restructure itself to buy, distribute, and sell local farmed goods more efficiently and at more competitive prices. This will not only increase the likelihood that institutions who specifically commit to local foods will choose to serve these products, but that a wider range of consumers will have access at better prices as well.

**A key strength of the organization is the bounded scope of this mission. It is a mission that people can wrap their heads around and understand.**

Many of those involved in FINE commented that a key strength of the organization is the bounded scope of this mission. It is a mission that people can wrap their heads around and understand. FINE is not trying to advance sustainable agriculture worldwide. It is trying to change the way that food is grown, moved, processed, prepared, served, and consumed to favor



local products in a specific, well-defined region. FINE is trying to use institutional purchasing power and a regional approach to accomplish this. Given this challenging, but focused mission, potential participants can more easily decide if they buy into the idea or not. As it stands, those who voluntarily joined the leadership team expressed a joint understanding of this mission and clearly feel passionately enough about this topic to commit significant time to this mission.

A more complicated question is if the network has a defined understanding of how FINE can best facilitate this mission. FINE clearly sees itself as a connector. It links organizations across sectors and within different parts of the value chain to share best practices and to facilitate necessary dialogue. How this is done, however, lacks formal definition. The leadership team and staff meet regularly to direct the work of FINE and have built strong working relationships within the group, but these individuals only represent a slice of the necessary stakeholders. Information is filtered to a broader audience of over 600 people through FINE's email newsletters and website, but these do not create the deep connections needed for change. Instead, staff commented that much of the connection work happens more informally through the network director, leadership team members, and project leads. Perhaps most importantly, FINE brings key stakeholders together through conferences, meetings, and workshops. These provide opportunities for stakeholders to come together and problem solve collectively. This is an important function, but it does not speak to how FINE creates and supports lasting ongoing relationships once meetings are over.

**FINE does much more than simply connect partners, but also works with partner organizations to research and identify gaps that are preventing progress.**

Importantly, FINE does much more than simply connect partners, but also works with partner organizations to research and identify gaps that are preventing progress. For farm to school and farm to hospital, FINE supports partner organizations that are already active in these movements and doing much of the legwork themselves. However, for farm to college, FINE recognized that there is no clear network lead organization working on this for the region. Therefore, they hired Riley Neugebauer to serve as the farm to college manager. Neugebauer works closely with partner organizations, but takes on the hard work of building the farm to college network through contacting potential stakeholders, thinking about strategic direction, interfacing with potential partner organization, and providing basic technical assistance to colleges interested in using more locally sourced food. FINE is also active in directly sponsoring research on farm to college issues. For example, FINE received funding to work with eight college campuses in four New England states and partners within each state to provide technical assistance, collect data, and convene stakeholder meetings as these colleges to build the infrastructure to source more locally grown food. Convening a research team of partner organization and FINE staff, FINE collected information along the way to better understand whom to target at colleges (campus food service directors, sustainability coordinators, faculty, students, etc.). Through this, they identified that in addition to the campus staff and students, a successful farm to college effort must involve contract services managers, trade organizations, and others representing the supply side. FINE then publicized these key lessons by publishing case studies and recipes showcasing the use of local food within these eight colleges.

Outside of farm to college, FINE also facilitated research analyzing key aspects of the supply

chain such as food service management companies and food processing. The food services project analyzed the policies of two food service management companies to better understand the challenges to local food procurement. Moving forward, FINE hopes to create venues for partner organizations to strategize together on how best to work with food service management companies to increase local food purchasing based on these insights. The food-processing project works with seven New England food processors to better understand how these facilities can become more efficient and meet the demands of institutional buyers.

Overall, many of those that the Consensus Building Institute spoke with identified these research efforts as hugely important to moving the farm to institution movement forward realistically. Going forward, FINE's leadership team will continue to define its role in project support and facilitation and fostering key connections between organizations.

## Membership

To be a network, there must be participating organizations or individuals that the network connects. Defining who is eligible to be a member, what membership entails, and the size of the network are important decisions that dictate the ultimate design and capacity of the network. For FINE, membership remains one of the most difficult elements to define since there is no formal membership process. Unlike some other networks, FINE does not limit the number of people who can participate in the network. They do not ask members to pay dues or to commit to doing a certain amount of work. In fact, they do not even ask individuals to call themselves members. Importantly, FINE is in the process of developing a stakeholder survey that will help address these questions.

As it stands, the FINE network could be defined as the over 600 people who are on FINE's email list that receive newsletters and updates. These are people who attended meetings or conferences, or simply signed up for the newsletter on FINE's website. Realistically, only a small segment of these people engage meaningfully and regularly with FINE. Given this, these individuals are not a great way to define FINE's members.

More accurately, FINE's members are the national, regional, and state level partner organizations working on farm to institution efforts in New England that FINE interfaces with regularly. This includes, but is not limited to the groups FINE lists on their website and who are represented through the leadership team. These organizations represent diverse interests including agriculture, health and nutrition, and education. The majority of these partners are advocates for more local farmed goods, rather than actual participants in the supply chain. However, a select few are more directly involved, including the Connecticut Department of Agriculture and Shelburne Farms (a non-profit that is both a working farm and advocacy group for sustainable foods). Many of these partners were intentionally chosen based on their importance in the food value chain. For example, when FINE broke away from the NfTS umbrella, it sought partnerships with Health Care Without Harm and Real Food Challenge because of their sectoral experience with hospitals and universities and naturally aligned mission to promote local food.

Going forward FINE is debating if membership should be formalized. As long as partner organizations continue to be invested in FINE's work without more official commitments and FINE does not need additional funding from membership dues, this loose structure may

continue to work. Despite this, there are a few values to having official members. Setting eligibility requirements allows networks to be intentional about the size and diversity of the network. Having defined membership may also make it easier to contact, survey, and distribute information to participants. It could also be a means for distributing work more evenly by requiring that members (perhaps in different tiers) contribute time. For example, top-tier members might be required to participate in one of the working groups and attend a certain number of meetings. Of course, requiring more from members can reduce the number of people who feel able or willing to participate. Networks like FINE must determine whether having more members who may be only minimally active is ultimately more beneficial to their mission compared to having fewer members that contribute substantially.



## Value Proposition

A social-impact network will not get very far or have many members if other individuals or organizations do not see value to their participation. Plastrik et. al argue that for networks to be most effective, participants should not come in asking how they individually will benefit from participating, but instead what collectively they can accomplish together. Additionally, the value proposition must be flexible enough to envelop new collective needs as they arise or shift if old ideas become irrelevant.

Reflective of their purpose, FINE provides value in a number of ways. First is through its role as a connector. They create a venue for participants across the region, up and down the value chain, and across its three sectors to share best practices and valuable information. Events that bring together a diverse group of participants provide rare opportunity to identify value chain inefficiencies. Additionally, bringing together people across sectors (health care, college, and school) allows innovations in one sector to reach players in the others or for people to share key contacts. For example, schools and health care facilities realized that they depend on many of the same supply chain networks. Through FINE they can work together to reach out to those suppliers, present a more united front, and get better returns from those conversations. Additionally, Stacia Clinton at Health Care without Harm commented that when her organization succeeds or wants to advertise events such as their summit, she appreciated that she can reach out to FINE's communication coordinator to put that information on the website or into their newsletter. Through actions like this, FINE can raise the profile of the work being done by their partners. Importantly, this role is only as valuable as FINE participants make it. If organizations do not take the time to share the lessons they are learning with others, or if organizations are uninterested in listening to others, then the connection will provide little value. On the other hand, if participants embrace the opportunity to work together they can create greater value.

FINE also provides value through supporting research on key issues for the value chain, such as on the policies of food distributors. This research allows all members to be more intentional about where they are needed, who the necessary stakeholders are, the various challenges and hurdles they can expect to confront, and potential ways to overcome these challenges. This research is a key to moving the mission forward. Once again, the ability of a lean organization like FINE to conduct this research is dependent on the active participation of their members. FINE can facilitate and support research, but their partners and members of the leadership team must actually do the research.

Importantly, FINE is an organization that is learning over time and its research arm is an example of how FINE's value proposition is improving as they mature. Originally, the research process involved small project teams comprised of individuals from known partner organizations, who conducted research and then published reports. After that, the research was shared at one of two yearly convenings to whoever was invited. Based on feedback and discussions within the leadership team, FINE revised this methodology to create a mechanism for research teams to be more inclusive and to allow FINE to collect feedback throughout the process. For example, in FINE's research on the supply chain, they released a public request for proposals to find out who wanted to be involved in the research and used entries to select a more diverse team. Next, FINE discussed initial findings at their team meeting before a draft was even published. After a draft was completed, FINE held a webinar that presented the findings and discussed the goals for the next phase of that research. Following the webinar, they surveyed participants to learn what issues people outside the project team cared about and what questions others they had. Additionally, to provide internal evaluation of projects, FINE decided to designate a project lead that is in charge of the administration of the project, and a project liaison that regularly updates the leadership team on how the research is going.

A final, and important, value that FINE can provide is helping the network leverage funds. FINE advertises grants when they become available, co-sponsors grant applications, and helps

partners think through grant proposals. When FINE's development coordinator identifies funding opportunities, FINE makes sure to discuss if it makes most sense for FINE to pursue that grant, or if it makes more sense for one of the partner organization to take the lead on that grant application. This allows them to be more strategic and competitive when applying for funding. Many of the research projects, such as the supply-chain research, and a recent project to source more "Maine Food for the University of Maine," are funded by grants that FINE and their partners pursued together. Having multiple organizations apply for money together sends foundations and grant making bodies a clear message: these groups are already organized and willing to do the collaboration necessary to be



successful. Moving forward FINE wants to formalize their “collaborative development” program. It remains to be seen what this will look like, but may include a development newsletter and an open source database of funding opportunities and guidance on applying for federal grants.

## Governance Structure

While a network may be more loosely held together than a typical organization with a large internal staff and leadership team, it still must have a governance structure to determine the networks strategy as it matures and to make key decisions. Plastrik et al. argue that this governance structure must be careful not to dominate decision-making or exclude participants. It must also recognize that leadership needs to evolve over time as people leave and successors take their place.

FINE does not actually have any true staff members of their own, but rather contracts all of its administrative functions to private consultants. Currently, FINE has four part-time consultants who serve as “staff members” including a network director, communication coordinator, farm to college manager, and planning & development coordinator. These individuals provide backbone and administrative support. They maintain the website, plan events, apply for grants, and facilitate meetings. They also fill gaps that are not easily addressed through partner organizations, such as managing the farm to college sector.

In addition to the staff, FINE relies on a leadership team to make key decisions on FINE’s direction, organization, and policies. This leadership team involves representatives from many of FINE’s partners including Health Care Without Harm, American Farmland Trust New England, Farm Fresh Rhode Island, NOFA Vermont, and the New Hampshire Community Loan Fund. Three of the eight members have been involved with FINE since it was first launched, but the team has successfully evolved to incorporate new members over time. This allows the team to retain institutional knowledge while recognizing that new members will allow longevity and increase diversity. Beyond decision-making, this team participates in research. As mentioned earlier, when FINE pursues a specific research project or program, they convene a smaller working group consisting of members from their leadership team and partner organizations to conduct the research. One person is selected to be the project lead and another to be the leadership team’s liaison.

## Operating Principles

Networks must decide how members and staff will conduct the network’s business. Plastrik et. al. argue that healthy networks ask partners to do the work, encourage multiple partners to take on projects together, allow members to determine which connections create value, maintain transparent decision-making, and allow plans to be flexible.

FINE embodies each of these principles. While FINE has staff, by and large, this staff tries to limit their own work in favor of involving partner organizations. For example, FINE does not need to have an internal staff member facilitating farm to health care work because it established a relationship with Health Care Without Harm. This organization was already a leader in the region on farm to health care efforts and works closely with health care facilities to get transparent data about food service management companies and their food supply chain. This

meant that FINE could step back and support their work rather than taking a more assertive role. Likewise, they do not need to support a manager for farm to school, because they maintain a relationship with the RLA and RSC for the FtS network in the Northeast. On the other hand, FINE does manage the farm to college network effort more closely because there is no clear regional partner. However, if a partner organization arose that wanted to take on this role, FINE would likely scale their work back in favor of letting this partner carry more weight. This is done to ensure that partners have ownership over FINE's work and allows them to leverage the specific expertise these organizations bring to the network.

Participants also identified the collaborative and transparent nature of FINE's leadership structure to be a key asset. FINE does not function under one lead organization or partner. All members of the leadership team carry equal weight and have an equal voice in decisions. This creates a significant sense of shared vision, responsibility, and ownership. Staff members also do not make decisions without involving the leadership team. Members of the leadership team commended Peter Allison, FINE's Network Director, for filtering information and making sure that the whole leadership team has a clear picture of the current map of the farm to institution value chain. One member specifically explained that Allison is smart about asking members of the leadership team to join calls with him to ensure that he is not the only one making core decisions and that key information is communicated to the wider group.

Participants also identified that this group's willingness to engage in debates as a key strength. Rather than avoiding sticky subjects that can take time to resolve, this group sees differences of opinions as educational and valuable. Through debate they can learn more about various partner's perspective and identify areas of friction that are hurdles to their mission. They also do not make decisions simply by asking for people's opinion once, but circle back to make sure that opinions have not changed as new information arises. The leadership team, who conduct most business over email and telephone, sits down in person two or three times a year to discuss expectations and their decision-making framework. This creates a healthy working relationship between FINE's partners and ensures that the organization remains flexible to adapt as needed.

Finally, FINE's supported projects are collaborative in nature. All of the research projects have involved multiple partner institutions. For example, even though FINE's staff took on the responsibility of managing the farm to college sector, all of its work has involved key partners within the individual states and from national organizations such as Real Food Challenge. Additionally, an eight-member advisory committee including Farm Fresh RI, Health Care without Harm, Mass Farm to School, Real Food Challenge, University of New Hampshire, and Sustainable Food Systems, LLC, ran the research project on food service management companies together. This multi-sector and team based approach has proven effective for FINE.

Going forward FINE is aiming to strengthen its transparency and decision-making framework by developing a metrics project that will track key indicators and measure FINE's impact. This will allow FINE to more easily share the work they are doing with the public and to collect key information that can inform the development of future projects to pursue.

# Lessons and Principles

Based on our research, the Consensus Building Institute has identified a number of lessons that can be learned from FINE's early history and evolution to date. This is not an exhaustive list, but includes some key principles that we believe are transferrable to other similar networks.

## **Building a network takes time.**

Many of the early achievements of network organizations are process successes rather than product successes. FINE did a tremendous amount of work to establish camaraderie and build a framework for multi-state collaboration. They defined and set up an organizational and leadership structure to link partner groups together. They identified and built relationships with new partners that are essential to their mission. They secured additional and longer-term funding sources beyond the initial USDA grant. All of these steps are necessary for building a strong base and effective network that will have longevity.

## **Communicating successes are a challenge for network organizations.**

Much of the valuable work that FINE is doing is difficult to communicate to a wider public. The relationship building and foundational work is often invisible to outsiders looking in. Additionally, much of the non-process based successes are not actually products of FINE, but of their partner organizations. For example, while FINE may connect two key partners to facilitate a new agreement or pursue a project together, FINE is often not the one actually pursuing that project. This means that even as FINE moves into more substantive work, it is hard for FINE to take credit for any achievements.

## **Patient funders are assets.**

A few key funders, who have supported FINE since the early days, have been essential in FINE's success to date. The USDA grant that launched FINE was key in creating momentum for the organization, but ultimately was not a stable source of funding. Instead, other funders continue to support FINE year to year. Specifically, both the Henry P. Kendall Foundation and The John Merck Fund (JMF) provided grants for general operating support and network development.

FINE was lucky to find funders that understand the value of networks and that building a network from scratch is a lengthy process. Christine James at JMF commented that during the early years she watched FINE go through a lengthy process of mapping and identifying potential stakeholders, defining their value proposition, and creating the basic structure of the organization. Rather than being scared away, JMF recognized that relationship building is "real work" and was necessary before the group could possibly have more substantive conversations regarding the farm to institution value chain.

### **Active Funders can be assets.**

JMF's model is to be more highly involved with their grantees than many other similar foundations. They ask to go to a lot of meetings and expect to be consulted along the way. They want to know how projects develop. While some might see this as burdensome, for FINE it provides value. JMF understood the lengthy process of building a network, in part, because they witnessed the hard work that went into it. JMF also connected FINE to key potential stakeholders. Health Care Without Harm was another grantee of JMF and they were key in facilitating what has become one of FINE's most important partnerships.

### **Networks have a unique advantage for identifying gaps and inefficiencies.**

By virtue of being in the business of identifying stakeholders and who to invite to the table, network organizations are in a unique position to see gaps and inefficiencies within the value chain that might be missed by organizations more deeply embedded within it. For example, one of the key challenges in facilitating a farm to institution agreement in which institutions agree to source a certain percentage of their food from local sources, is building in assurances that the supply chain can meet the now increased demand. If FINE is not aware of the limitations to the regional supply, they could end up supporting agreements that quickly fall apart and hurt their long term objectives. Instead FINE can create value by guiding partner organizations to build a more robust supply chain in advance of asking institutions to make aggressive pledges.

### **Creating shared ownership can be valuable but is also scary.**

As mentioned above, the organizational structure of FINE's leadership team does not identify a single lead organization. This ensures that partners feel a greater sense of responsibility. Organizations that choose to be involved are empowered to direct the organization of the network, problem solve as a group, and create a robust shared vision. However, it also creates risk. If any single organization is unable to follow-through on their commitments, there is not a lead organization that will step in on their behalf. Ultimately, the entire leadership team is responsible to FINE's funders. If they do not meet their requirements collectively, FINE runs the risk of losing sponsorship.

### **At some point formally defining membership may prove worthwhile.**

Currently FINE does not formally define membership in any way. Internally, the leadership team and staff have been debating if this should change. Keeping membership open and undefined allows FINE to be accessible to all groups interested in participating and for FINE to grow more organically. People are not excluded based on inability to pay dues or to commit their time. However, it also makes it more difficult to mobilize members towards specific goals, to hold people accountable, or to make strategic decisions about the networks size and diversity of members.

### **Members only get as much out of the network as they put into it.**

FINE as a network does not provide a direct service to network members. Instead, network members come together to create value and service. As such, how much partner organizations get from FINE is highly dependent on how much they put into the network. If partners actively



share information, volunteer to co-support or co-conduct research, and problem solve together, the network will be healthy and fulfill its value proposition. If members do not do this, little value is gained by being part of the network.

### **Research that answers questions not clearly in the wheelhouse of any single organization is valuable.**

Many people involved with FINE expressed deep appreciation for the research projects that FINE pursued. This research illuminated where the power is located throughout the farm to institution value chain and the key stumbling blocks for increased efficiency. For example, New England has more small farms compared to many other parts of the country. Due to their size, these smaller farms may be less willing to take risks because they do not have the capital to bounce back if changes go badly. Any farm to institution advocate that asks farmers to make significant changes must think through how they can reassure farmers that their businesses will benefit.

### **Network organizations can provide more complete maps of the landscape.**

Members identified that one of the most important roles FINE plays is providing a map of the whole farm to institution value chain. By bringing many groups together, the network can better understand the role each partner is playing. Using this information, FINE can ask important questions: What is working? What is not working? What might be working, but could be better if someone was more intentionally addressing that issue? Where are there gaps? Is there a partner organization that could easily address that gap? Each individual partner may not see these issues from their smaller vantage point or be able to answer these questions. By working together, they can more effectively map the landscape.

### **Transparency and honest debate creates long-term partners.**

Partners and staff involved with FINE identified the level of trust and transparency within the organization as one of its key assets. They commended Allison for not making decisions unilaterally. Instead, Allison allows all members of the leadership team and other key partners to have a voice. When there are contentious issues, FINE has allowed debates to happen rather than shutting down conversations. This gives people an opportunity to be heard and to increase their understanding of alternative perspectives.

### **Loose networks such as FINE can create real value.**

While much of the work FINE does is behind the scenes, change is already emerging within New England. As of early 2015, 68 healthcare facilities have signed the Healthy Food in Health Care Pledge and 95 have joined the Healthier Hospitals Initiative Food Challenge. 9 colleges have signed the Real Food Challenge Pledge within New England and 68 are members of the American Association of Sustainability in Higher Education. Additionally 44% of schools in the region are participating in the USDA Farm to School census and are engaged in farm to school activities. This represents 23.5 million students and \$383.8 million food dollars. As the organization matures, the purchasing power for local food will hopefully continue to grow.

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