

# 18: Building Resilient Local Food Systems



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We propose a Biodistrict Center of Excellence (BCE) - a self-governing, international body providing education, funding, technology, and resources - to support the bottom-up formation of local biodistricts and a resilient global network. Biodistricts are alliances of local food systems actors who agree on adopting regenerative agriculture practices to fulfill economic, environmental, and sociocultural aims and collaborating to enhance production, nutrition, jobs, and wellbeing for people and the planet.

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## The Need

The agroindustrial food system harms human and planetary health and separates communities from their cultures. Our call to action is to support biodistrict initiatives around the world to create regenerative, resilient local food systems. Their impact is limited by:

**Inherent food systems inequality.** Large companies, which are politically and financially favored, prioritize profit over environmental, economic, and health outcomes. Local, smaller farmers, distributors, cooks, crafts people and marketplaces are shut out. This power imbalance repeats at the local level where communities and consumers lack access to regenerative food and markets.

**The siloed behaviour of system stakeholders** is reflected in a lack of cooperation among local food actors and a focus on short-term benefits to the detriment of long term sustainability. While fulfilling their individual roles (producer, buyer, seller, policy-maker), stakeholders often do not understand their interconnection to the larger system, nor can they envisage the benefits that would accrue through strengthened networks and a systems mindset.

**Information gaps support the siloing of stakeholders** as they remain unaware of innovations, resources, and the possibilities of change. Our current food system lacks a comprehensive and accessible platform for free and open information exchange to inform action, advocacy, and changes in consumer demand.

## The Solution

We propose the creation of the Biodistrict Center of Excellence (BCE), an international support body that facilitates the creation and networking of local biodistricts towards the development of a resilient and regenerative global network of biodistricts.

Biodistricts are alliances - based on the principles of regenerative agriculture, circularity and the SDGs - of local farmers, small/medium-scale processors/agribusinesses, food retailers/organizations, bio-energy producers, community/kitchen gardens, local governments and consumers..

The BCE will provide access, through scaling partners, to educational, technical, and financial resources to support the formation of biodistricts. The BCE is an online platform operating through a decentralized network, accessible through a “low-tech high-touch” approach in partnership with local organizations where digital access is limited. The incentive in joining the BCE is the opportunity to access resources for biodistrict formation, funding, collaboration and learning.

# The Solution

We envision local food system actor engagement will unfold in 3 stages:

## SEED STAGE:

Local food system actors come together in a bottom-up process as Seed initiatives. Upon first interaction with the BCE they are paired with an advisor to examine their needs and regional contexts, before connecting them with fellow Seeds and opening resource access. Cohort 18's solutions will act as Seeds for the BCE pilot project.

## CLUSTER STAGE:

Once participating members are formalized, Seeds advance to the Cluster stage where the BCE guides collaborative meetings to identify a shared vision and values, and prepares a needs proposal to identify the support required to grow to a Biodistrict.

## BIODISTRICT STAGE:

Resources are made available in response to the needs proposal, including funding, expert support, education opportunities and the resources to host a food festival, which will introduce the Biodistrict to the community, promote business networking, and celebrate culture. The BCE also supports the Biodistricts to implement regenerative growing techniques and obtain holistic certification.

Finally, the global network links Biodistricts to one another, promoting cross-Biodistrict collaboration, sharing best practices, offering Biodistrict models for prospective Seeds and cementing a global network of thriving local food systems.

**The end result is a systems change that shifts the balance of power in our global food system towards local actors through the creation of a resilient and regenerative network via BCE support.**





## The Impact

Our solution will catalyze the elevation of local food system solutions to their full potential, ensuring that the solutions that hold the best chance at mitigating agriculture-related climate change, regenerating ecosystems, ending food insecurity, upholding human rights (especially for marginalized populations), ensuring food sovereignty, honoring culture and producing high quality, nourishing food, achieve fruition.

In the short term, the problem of disconnected actors at the local level will be solved, as the BCE facilitates collaboration at all levels and encourages global networking and innovation to continue even after the biodistrict has been formed. Over time, collective power promotes locally driven systems change.

In the medium term, the BCE generates valuable education opportunities for its members to strengthen their solutions, as well as for the public to better navigate food systems by understanding the benefits of buying local, healthy food.

In the long term, the global food system will experience a shift in power from prioritizing large, often international actors towards local, community-based actors, as the BCE - a sustainable support body for local food system actors - equalizes the power imbalance within our food system and empowers local leaders.

# Turning Barriers into Opportunities

Systemic Barriers  
Systemic Change Opportunities



**Getting buy-in and trust** from community food actors can be a challenge. Many involved in the food system will have been operating in a particular way for years - or even generations. For example, when promoting regenerative growing methods, and holistic certification, farmers may fear reduced yields and higher costs. These concerns and general discomfort with new approaches may cause various actors to resist.



- a. Identify incentives for individual actors to work together, in part through a demonstration effect of pilot biodistricts and use of BCE materials and networks, including a global educator network, to demonstrate benefits.
- b. Celebrate prospective biodistricts with community gardens, community kitchens, food festivals, etc. in which BCE and community members come together to explore the vision
- c. Prioritize initiatives lead by or targeted to marginalized actors (women, Indigenous people, BIPOC), including those that promote Indigenous and local food culture and land stewardship



**Logistics, specifically digital access and language barriers**, will be a challenge for the global platform to achieve impact. Lack of internet access, or lack of materials available in all local languages, could limit many communities' ability to access the BCE, and thus make use of educational and support materials or engage in discussions.



- a. A "low tech-high touch" approach employs local biodistrict members to facilitate regular community gatherings at which to share information obtained through the BCE and elsewhere.
- b. Local organizations can be called on to provide different kinds of needed support (education, marketing, awareness, funding), with a special focus on bridging technology gaps (e.g. providing internet access in rural areas)



**Lack of resources, specifically funding.** Funding will be needed at both the global and local level for each biodistrict. Establishing the BCE requires the development and translation of materials as well as the implementation of a digital platform. For each biodistrict, meeting holistic certification requirements and restructuring elements of the food system will require investments.



- a. BCE fundraises at the global level with support from scaling partners and the UN FAO network
- b. BCE provides support and recommendations for the development of local resource banks and fundraising for prospective and established biodistricts

# Navigating Unknowns



## Potential Unintended Consequences

**Marginalization of rural areas and disadvantaged groups** - The certification mechanism and requirement for a formal biodistrict in order to access funding - and challenges accessing BCE resources - may further stress marginalized groups.

**Future dominating food systems actor** - When there are many actors in a biodistrict, one or a small group of actors could eventually become dominant, reproducing the power imbalances we seek to dismantle.

**Heavy load for lead representative of “seed” or cluster** - This role could be a lot of work for the lead representatives, who are already heading their own organizations/individual solutions and lack time and resources.



## Thinking Ahead - *strategies to avoid these consequences*

To mitigate, the BCE will offer educational and technical resources, and facilitate financial matchmaking, at the Seed level, ensuring that resources are accessible to actors that do not have the capacity or necessary environment to become a formal Biodistrict.

A cooperative governance structure will be suggested at local levels to allow for true economic and social democracy in the food system.

A robust support environment and a basic “seed” to cluster template will guard against overburdening lead representatives and incentivise development from cluster to biodistrict. BCE personnel could be assigned to each “seed” to ensure they are supported.

*We seek scaling partners for guidance and financing to build out the BCE:*

- Act as the initial “host institution” of the BCE, including personnel to carry out interactive duties
- Implement a digital platform to host the BCE and the global network
- Develop a pilot project for the BCE with Cohort 18 solutions acting as pilot “seeds”
- Provide or facilitate access to sustainable funding streams for the biodistricts delivered through the BCE
- Contribute educational, technical, technological, marketing/communication and political expertise that can be streamlined into service/program offerings through the BCE
- Build on experience to inform the development of the holistic certification



## Similar Solutions in Action

**Today there are 26 established biodistricts in Italy.**

1. The first biodistrict was established in the Cilento park, where the UNESCO heritage designated “Mediterranean diet” originated, 20 years ago. It now counts 400 farms and 2000 ha of cultivable land.
2. Following this experience, the Italian Association of Organic Agriculture (AIAB) formalized steps to move from a “seed” to a biodistrict and established an operating framework and statute. Today, AIAB is a national facilitator for new biodistricts.
3. Biodistrict Valdera committee was founded in early 2020 by a small group of organic food stakeholders. A participatory path of conferences and food festivals helped self-finance the “seed” and grow awareness within the territory and local administrations. Today Biodistrict Valdera is formally recognised, counting 60 members and sponsored by 9 municipalities. Biodistrict Valdera envisioned a Bio-districts Network and holistically certified food (ReFood), which by 2030 will replace the “Mediterranean diet” as the most nourishing, healthy, sustainable and just diet.

*“Biodistricts have proven to be places with a culture of innovation, progressive improvement of agricultural practices, integrity and transparency, inclusive collaboration, holistic systems and pricing based on real costs, including the fair and dignified compensation of human commitment.” Stefano Gonnelli, President of Biodistretto Valdera.*







 Cohort Participation Countries

# ENABLING BIODISTRICTS TO **SPROUT** THROUGH THE CRACKS OF A **BROKEN** GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEM



Cocina Colaboratorio

