

Local Food in the Phoenix Metropolitan Area: Barriers and Enablers as Perceived by Food System Stakeholders

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Introduction

In recent years, researchers and practitioners have begun to explore the many environmental, social, and economic benefits of *local* agriculture and food systems. The Phoenix metropolitan area is one of the fastest growing urban regions in the nation, established in the harsh climate of the Sonoran desert. This positions the region as a highly unique case in local food system sustainability.

Objectives

The purpose of this project was to explore the nature of Phoenix's local food system as perceived by its producers, foodservice providers, distributors and consumer representatives, with a particular focus on the definitions of "local," motivations and barriers to participation in local food networks, and recommendations for improving the system.

Methods

An inductive qualitative research approach was used to gain insight into perceptions of Phoenix's local food system. Interviews with 30 key stakeholders in the Phoenix Metropolitan Area were audio recorded and transcribed.

Stakeholders Interviewed:

- 6 consumer/community representatives
- 9 producers and farm organizations
- 10 foodservice providers and organizations
- 5 food distributors

The interview protocol was developed based on a literature review performed as background research for this study. Through multiple readings of the interview transcriptions, frequently occurring themes were identified as the prominent perceptions of local food in the Phoenix context.



Defining "Local Food"

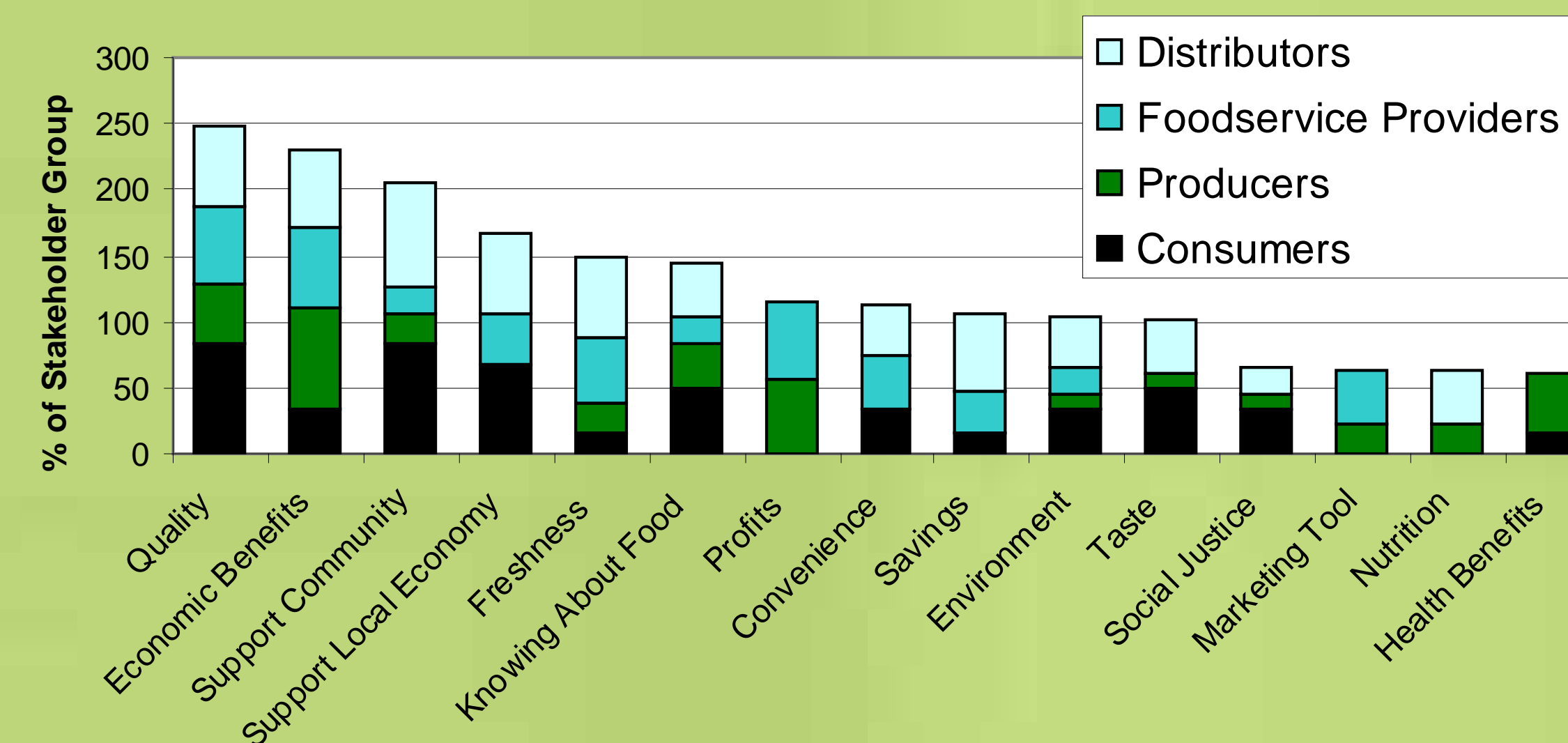
- **Arizona Grown**
- **Radius ("my yard", 50, 150, 300 miles)**
- **Small-scale agriculture**
- **Eating seasonally or sustainably**
- **A "selling point" (marketing technique)**

Stated by 50% of those interviewed, the most frequently occurring definition of "local food" was anything grown in the State of Arizona. Others preferred to define local in terms of a radius from their home. Responses ranged from "my yard" to the entire southwest. Some saw the term used as a "selling point." Others associated 'local food' with sustainability, eating seasonally, and small-scale farming (see figure 1).

Motivating Forces

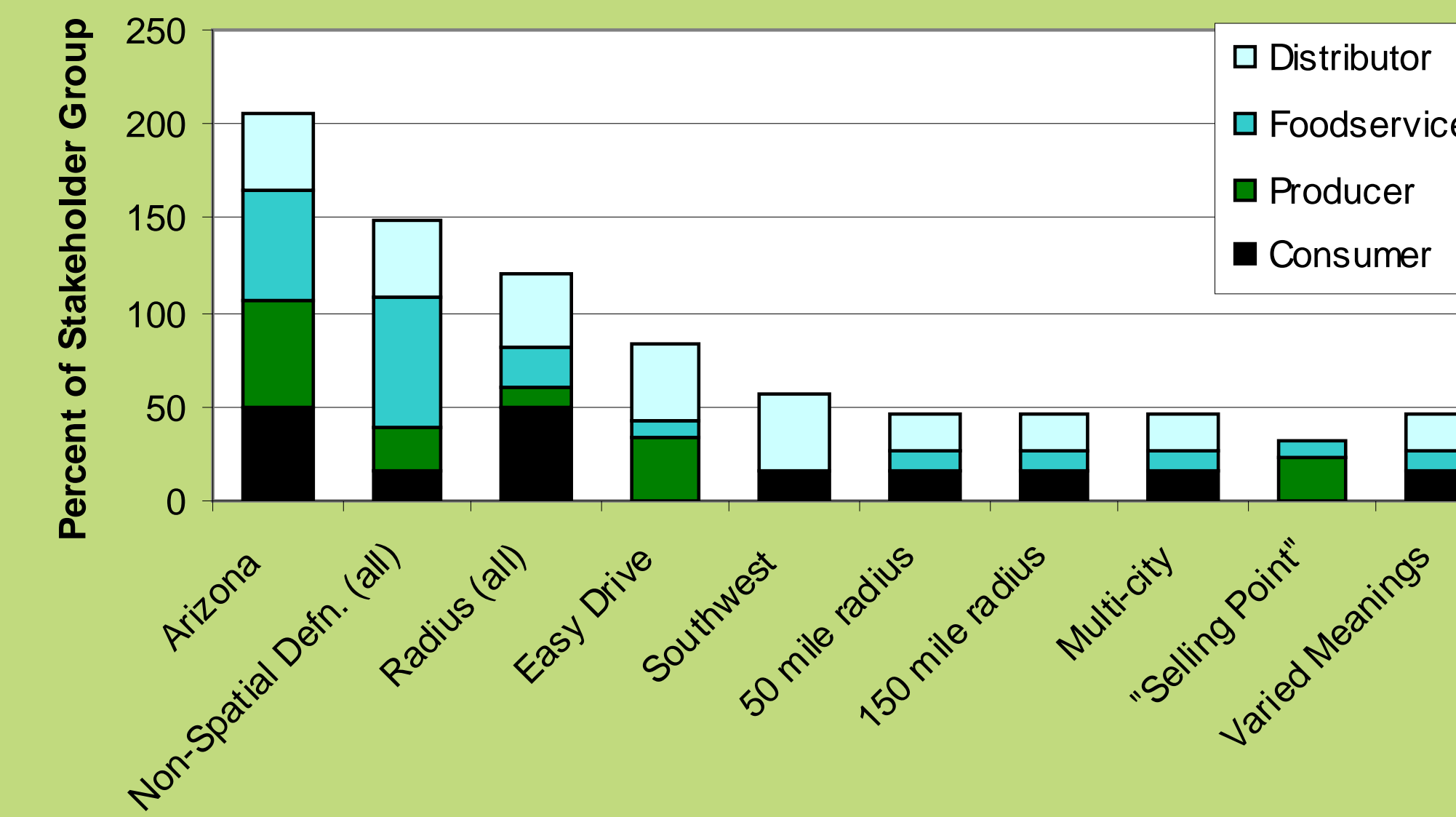
- **Quality**
- **Economic benefits**
- **Supporting local community**
- **Knowing where food comes from**
- **Environmental benefits**

Figure 2. Motivations



In this study, several important distinctions between the stakeholders' motivations for participating in the local food system emerged. **Consumers** were found to be primarily motivated by a desire to support the local community and to know where one's food came from. They also noted improved flavor, freshness, and a desire for fossil fuel reductions. **Distributors'** motivations appeared to be fairly similar, though many also noted the cost savings associated with less transport distance. **Producers and foodservice providers**, in contrast, were primarily driven by the economics of local food. Specifically, they focused on the extra profits to be made from local food, as well as product quality. A few producers and distributors noted the nutritional benefits of fresher, local products (see figure 2).

Figure 1. Definitions of Local Food

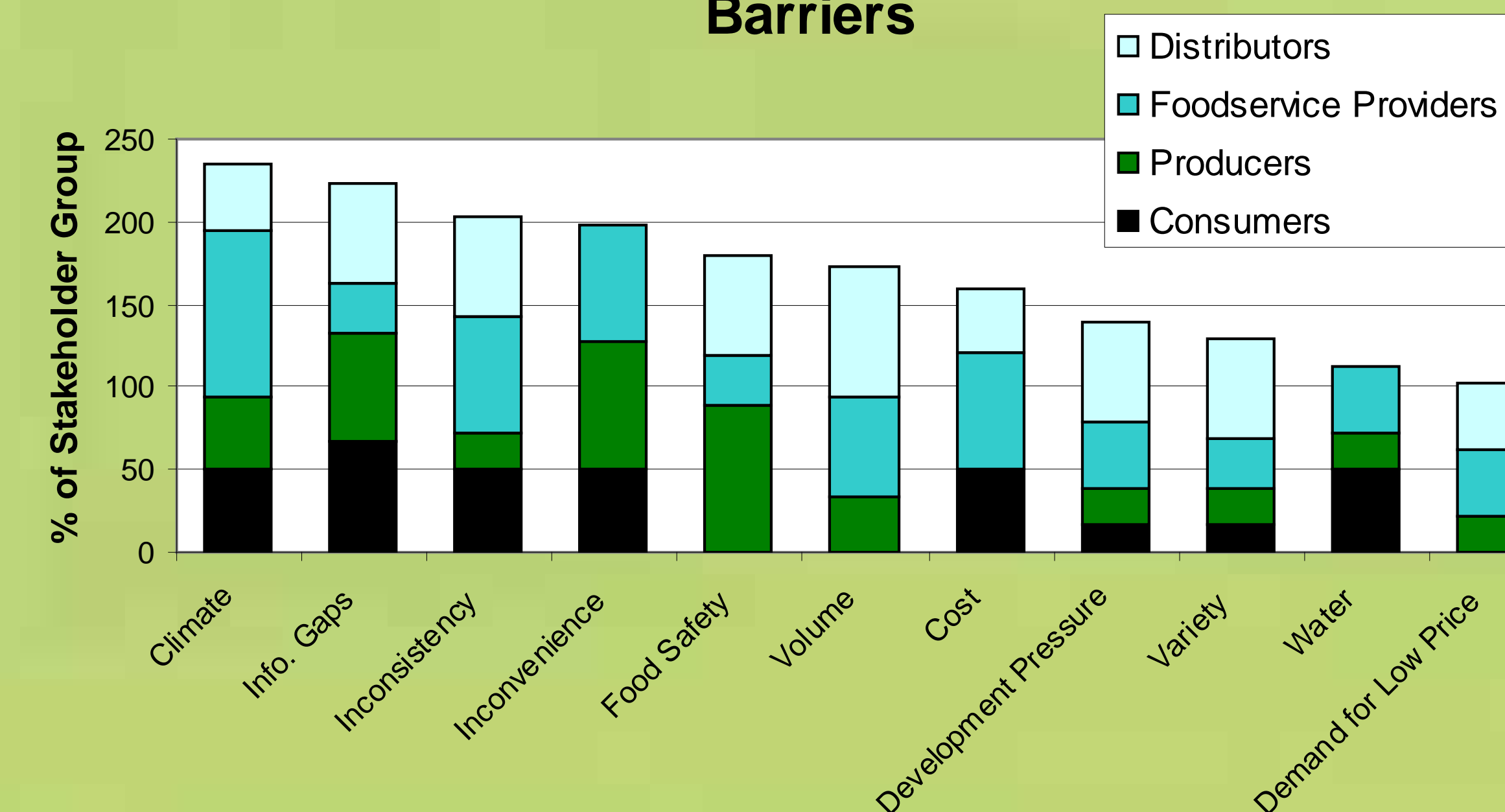


Barriers to Local Food

- **Climate**
- **Cost**
- **Food Safety**
- **Lack of Information**
- **Inconvenience**
- **Development Pressure**

The major barriers to participation in local food networks differed somewhat substantially between the stakeholder groups. **Distributors and foodservice providers** were mostly challenged with issues of inadequate supply. **Producers** were hampered by the costs involved in food safety regulation compliance and lack of information on how to successfully produce and market local foods. **Consumers** were challenged by a lack of information regarding where to obtain local products, but also frequently mentioned frustration with the inconvenience of local food outlets, seasonality issues, food prices and the environmental (water use) impacts of sourcing locally (see figure 3).

Figure 3. Barriers

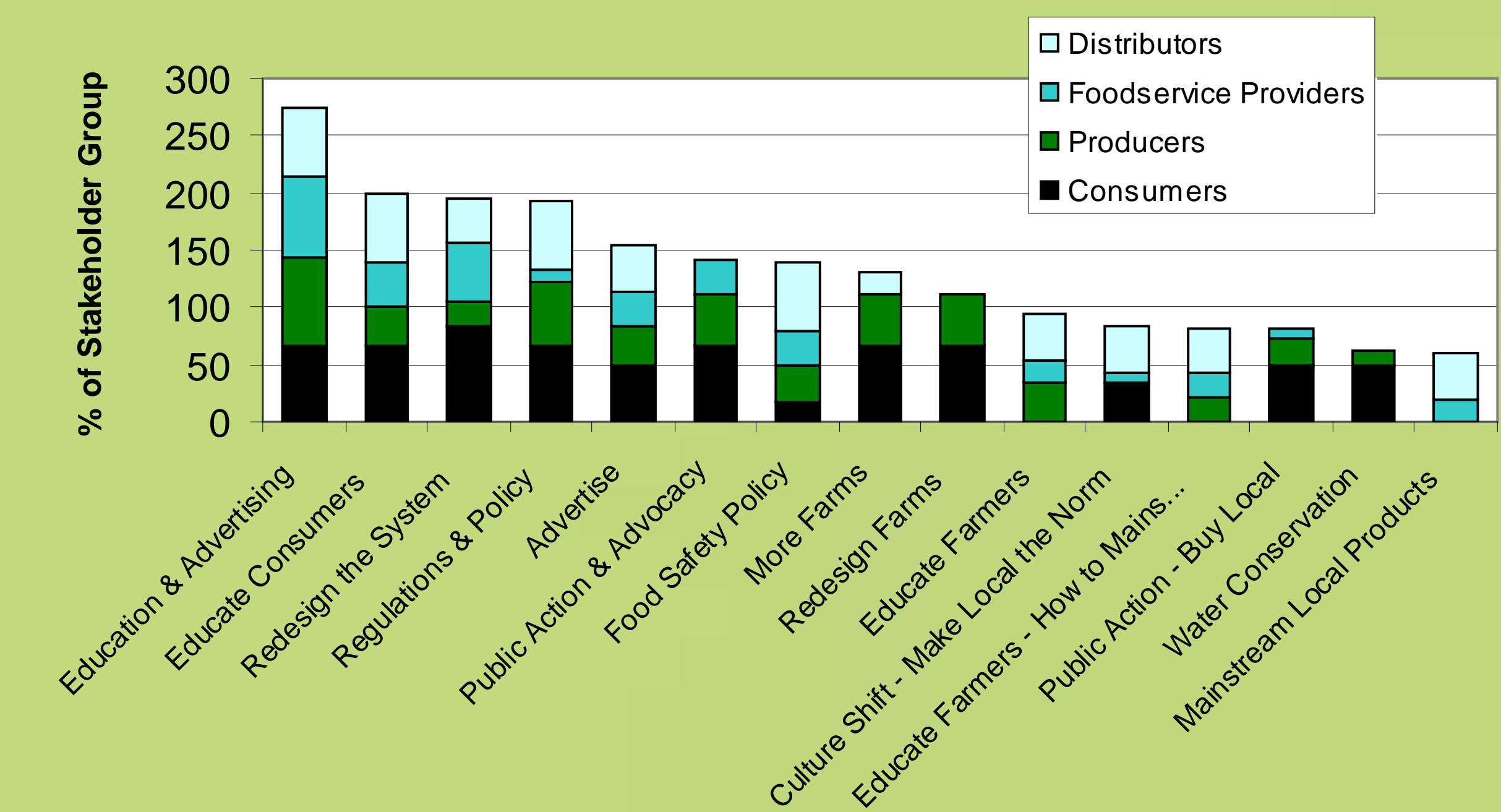


Recommendations

- **Education**
- **Mainstreaming**
- **More farms & farmers' markets**
- **Food safety & farmers' market regulation improvements**

Those interviewed suggested a number of recommendations for overcoming the barriers present in the current Phoenix local food system. Increased education and advertising were the most frequently discussed recommendations, followed by suggestions for policy change, and the need for more farms catered to the local market. Producers and consumers focused on improvements to farms and local markets, while distributors and foodservice providers emphasized mainstreaming of local products (see figure 4).

Figure 4. Recommendations



Conclusions

Despite climate-related supply constraints, economic cost barriers, and the general inconvenience of participating in local food networks, many people seem strongly motivated to participate in the local food system in the Valley. Many interesting socio-economic questions regarding the affordability, profitability, and social equity of local foods emerged as a result of this study. Tensions between the need for an adequate, consistent food supply, issues with agricultural water use, and the pressure of development were all highlighted by the stakeholders. Pursuing additional research as to the feasibility and sustainability of the local food system, particularly in terms of reconciling the current system to the conflicting needs of its stakeholders will be crucial to its continued presence in the Phoenix region.