“PLATICAS” on Local Economic Development

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Chapter One: Introduction
1.1. RCN-CE3SAR Overview

Research coordination network – Climate, Energy, Environment and Engagement in Semiarid Regions (RCN CE3SAR) is a federally-funded partnership of researchers advancing understanding of science, engineering and education for sustainability (SEES) in South Texas. RCN CE3SAR taps regional research capacities specific to sustainability in semiarid climates contiguous to the Gulf of Mexico, while leveraging research expertise outside the region. The network engages regional communities, government and private-sector stakeholders to inform public policy development. By aligning regional capacities that previously were largely disconnected, RCN CE3SAR brings focus and synergy to a range of research issues that will profoundly impact the region and its socioeconomic future.

On May 23-25, 2012, the RCN CE3SAR Charette was held at the Southwest Research Institute, San Antonio, Texas. Seventy-one participants attended the Charette, who were educators, stakeholders and graduate students. The purposes of holding the Charette were to (1) provide a forum to allow participants to get to know each other and each other’s research activities, and (2) elicit a broad spectrum of insights that would be used by the Research Coordination Network (RCN) steering committee to formulate a draft 5-year strategic plan for RCN CE-3SAR. Based on the discussions and opinions of Charette participants, the strategic plan was drafted.

Vision

RCN CE3SAR is designed to develop, test, and begin implementing an innovative model for conducting interdisciplinary, region-specific, sustainability research closely tied to the needs and concerns of highly-engaged local stakeholders.
Mission

RCN CE3SAR is a group of universities and research centers that identify, prioritize, and conduct research, and communicates research results among the stakeholders. The network uses a multidisciplinary approach to solve problems by integrating technologies, socioeconomics, and environmental factors related to energy, water, and climate. The network objective is to make the South Texas region more vibrant and sustainable over the long term, consistent with its distinctive populations and cultures.

1.2. Imperatives and Goals

Imperative 1
Research Coordination Network for Climate, Energy, Environment and Engagement in Semi-arid Regions (RCN CE3SAR) Strategic Plan.

Create a community-driven research-supported model and framework for sustainability growth and development in South Texas.

Strategic Goal 1.1
Establish and sustain a leadership group to plan the RCN CE3SAR project

Strategic Goal 1.2
Create workgroups to produce white papers or road maps for guiding the overall outcome of CE3SAR

Strategic Goal 1.3
Establish a network from a variety of disciplines working with community members, businesses, non-profit organizations and government and elected officials

Imperative 2

Identify activities and research topics pertinent to RCN CE3SAR’s vision and mission; establish a framework that facilitates selection, prioritization and execution of research and related
activities under separately funded projects.

**Strategic Goal 2.1**
Develop a plan for engaging communities and stakeholders

**Strategic Goal 2.2**
Collaborate with stakeholders to develop a list of research topics related to network themes

**Strategic Goal 2.3**
Collaborate with stakeholders to develop a list of research topics related to energy

**Strategic Goal 2.4**
Collaborate with stakeholders to develop a list of research topics related to environments, wildlife conservation

**Strategic Goal 2.5**
Provide a forum for developing an externally funded proposal to create an enhanced baseline water quality and quantity datasets that produce understanding of regional water dynamics in order to ensure clean, safe and reliable water supplies for South Texas

**Imperative 3**
Explore funding opportunities

**Strategic Goal 3.1**
Identify sustainability-related funding opportunities using tools such as In4Grants®

**Strategic Goal 3.2**
Inform network partners of sustainability-related funding opportunities and encourage the submission of collaborative, interdisciplinary grant proposals; develop and submit at least one proposal for external funding led by multiple RCN partners

**Strategic Goal 3.3**
Identify funding opportunities for sustainability education and encourage the submission of program grant proposals

**Imperative 4**
Foster new technologies, processes, and approaches to sustainability development in South Texas.

**Strategic Goal 4.1**
Explore GIS’s implementation in sustainability research and stakeholder engagement
Strategic Goal 4.2
Extend appropriate technology (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appropriate_technology) and encourage permaculture(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Permaculture) in South Texas communities.

Imperative 5
Offer an online graduate certificate in sustainability education to students at CE3SAR member universities.

Strategic Goal 5.1
Identify personnel at each institution to develop curricula

Strategic Goal 5.2
Identify and promote within RCN member institutions means for recognizing faculty and staff contributions to this Imperative

Strategic Goal 5.3
Integrate sustainability education into appropriate courses

Strategic Goal 5.4
Design activities and short courses to promote sustainability concept and to educate general public.

Imperative 6

Establish an organizational structure and relationships that will last over the long term, far beyond the funding cycle of the RCN CE3SAR. The structure and relationships in need of explanation include all types of stakeholders.

Strategic Goal 6.1
Create website to promote sustainability and recruit participants

Strategic Goal 6.2
Establish a database to preserve RCN CE3SAR documents and sustainability resources and data

Strategic Goal 6.3
Establish an inventory of network participant and stakeholder needs
Strategic Goal 6.4
Identify experts and liaisons in local and international policy, ecosystem science, pollution, geospatial analysis, education, workforce development and all other relevant field

Strategic Goal 6.5
Establish a collaborative mechanism such as Redmine to support RCN CE3SAR research collaboration, education and communication.

Strategic Goal 6.6
Encourage network interaction; organize meetings, workshops regularly and encourage participants to attend.

1.3. Platicas Overview

Our long-term vision will be to use a strategic, iterative process to integrate existing and consolidate new network collaborators among a multitude of disciplines and domains related to sustainability, and conduct regional engagement activities that meet stakeholder needs specific to South Texas.

The networked research and educational capacities will focus on critical domains and intersections among a range of regional sustainability variables including: physical variables such as climate, water and energy; spatial variables such as scale, geographies and community locations; and socioeconomic variables such as populations, cultures and institutions. Moreover, just as social, economic, and ethical issues are addressed as elements of “environmental justice,” there are what might be called “sustainability justice” issues that are functions of economics, education, culture, geography, and scaling among population groups. To address these issues, it is critical that the proposed network make knowledge-based sustainability science relevant and accessible to all of South Texas’ populations, socioeconomic groups and cultures.

RCN CE3SAR is designed to develop, test, and begin implementing an innovative model for conducting interdisciplinary, region- specific, sustainability research closely tied to the needs and concerns of highly- engaged local stakeholders.
Experience has shown that the model of importing researchers from outside the region with little connection to the community to conduct their research, leave and publish in a scholarly journal results in low acceptance of research results by local decision-makers and by the community (Kellstedt, Ahran and Vedlitz, 2008). Residents in South Texas have been historically isolated and are suspicious of “outsiders.” It has become clear that in order for sustainability research to have a local impact it must be advanced by regional researchers who may draw on national and international expertise.

This process, moreover, builds trust, advances confidence in the capacity and commitment of participants to achieve success in collaborative research efforts, and deepens inter- and intra-institutional understandings of research interests, capacities, resources and expertise. In this way, network research development leads to productive research partnerships, particularly as they advance core thematic areas identified through strategic and scenario planning as various institutional capacities are configured and reconfigured in multiple ways.

**RCN-CE3SAR Research Question:**

The “founding” questions of the proposed RCN CE3SAR include:

- What does sustainability mean in a semiarid region?
- What are sustainable boundaries for population groups in semiarid regions?
- How is sustainability in South Texas impacted by political, cultural and religious assumptions?
- What tools are needed to address sustainability at community level?
- How can sustainability be viewed at various spatial scales?
- How does sustainability affect those without education or socioeconomic resources?
How is the issue of water – the “currency” of sustainability (the “canary in coal mine indicator”) – best addressed in South Texas?

How does public opinion affect how energy, water and geographical space are used? How do South Texas political systems affect decisions and policies that affect sustainability?

How can research results be effectively communicated to local communities (taking into account demographic, cultural, language and economic changes in the region)?

77 Flea Market in Brownsville, Texas:

For its initial phase, a series of public engagement sessions will take place in Brownsville, Texas. The target constituents for these sessions will be microbusiness owners of the 77 Flea Market, hosting the city’s largest concentration of vendors every weekend. The project will focus on establishing connections at an existing thriving market hub that fosters a dialogue between the city and localized economic development and through underground economies. Street vending is not allowed in the City of Brownsville, therefore, the 77 Flea Market is a primary location access to concentrated demand of small business development.

The Brownsville 77 Flea market is a 77-acre with approximately 1,500 vendor stalls available for rent every weekend. It operates only Saturdays and Sundays from 5am to 6pm. This market is one of two flea markets in Brownsville, the other however is not an open-air market and therefore does not fit the criteria of the study. The market is a recognized business entity for the city with vendors needing to register using a tax I.D. number with the market management in order to operate their business. Additionally, vendors selling any food products are required to have a health department permit with the city. The market is found at the edge of the city limits but contained within the boundaries of it. It therefore is governed by city policy and not escaping regulatory provisions in the county as some might assume as compared to
under regulated housing typologies such as south Texas colonias.

Figure 1: 77 Flea Market in Brownsville, Texas
Source: Bing Maps, 2015

Big Questions:

This project will focus on investigating the following RNC CE3SAR research questions:

-How is sustainability in South Texas impacted by political, cultural and religious assumptions?

The engagement session would outline the framework and goals of both the city and entrepreneur constituents in an attempt to align them in a unified vision for a more sustainable future.

How can sustainability be viewed at various spatial scales?

The platicas will serve as a platform for learning about the role of small businesses in the city of Brownsville and the Border region.

How does sustainability affect those without education or socioeconomic resources?
By bringing public and private stakeholders to the table, participants will be able to engage in informal conversations with the city planning department and market management.

*How does public opinion affect how energy, water and geographical space are used?*

One outcome from the research will be to understand how space allotment and regulation as mandated by the city and the market has impacted the city development.

*How can research results be effectively communicated to local communities (taking into account demographic, cultural, language and economic changes in the region)?*

The intended deliverables will be a series of paper and web-based pamphlets focusing on 3 goals:

1. Being a voice for the city through simplified policy analysis for information dissemination to people of all educational levels
2. Being a voice for local business owners and presenting a unified voice of what is needed to improve their place as micro-economic engines in the city
3. Developing a framework of public engagement in order for the model to be replicated through the RNC in similar settings throughout South Texas.

**Framing the Sustainability Link:**

CE3SAR RCN focuses on the regional convergence and interrelated impacts for sustainability. This study looks at how to apply a traditional process of engagement that can be applied to different topics. This project assumed sustainability to be encompassed by a triple bottom line approach: environmental protection, economic prosperity, and social equity.
Project Goals:

• The aim to understand how to engage communities in the Rio Grande Valley and to test this process of engagement via a study of local economic development as it applies to sustainability.

• This project aims for transferability in a comprehensive approach to identify what might be a “multiplier” to improved engagement with communities.

• The process generated and tested with the flea market focus will be a way of validating the significance and interdependence of the economy, social equity, and environmental aspects of sustainability as they apply to the south Texas region.

PROCESS AND IMPLEMENTATION

Project Phases:

Phase 1: Research
• Key Goals:
  - To become familiarized with the study area and its social, economic, and political context.
  - To analyze similar planning/engagement models.
  - Study the relevant planning policy for the City of Brownsville that is applicable to the intended business constituents.

Phase 2: Session Design & Development
• Key Goals:
  - Contact Flea Market management to obtain approval for holding the sessions.
  - Contact the City of Brownsville planning department to invite them in collaborating.
Prepare and develop the structure and presentation format for the “platica”, engagement session.

Phase 3: Engagement Sessions

• Key Goals:
- CE3SAR: The research will culminate in an intervention or “platica” in Brownsville where individuals impacted by the Latino vendor market operations will have an opportunity to reflect on their role, capacity, and impact to sustainability for the Rio Grande Valley through the economic prosperity of the market.
- Develop an evaluating tool for improving the planned engagement model/sessions. It is the aim of this project that through conversation the key issues and themes related to business development will emerge.
- Platicas will aim to understand, explore, and discovery market needs and assets of the stakeholders.
- Platicas will aim to encourage dialogue for how to better support small business development and local economic development for the city and South Texas region. This dialogue will aim at understanding the public private roles of the market management in the context to city regulatory provisions.

Predicted Themes:
Out of the platicas we predict that the issue of transferability will rise. It is the aim of the project to test through the model below, see Figure 2, the methods for engaging a community in South Texas. The following are a few of the themes that are expected to arise and thus become applicable in other contexts of community engagement:

• Entrepreneurship
• Empowerment
• Self resiliency
• Community organization
• Accountability
• Leadership
• Creativity and ingenuity
• Survival

Phase 4: Community Engagement Manual: Lessons Learned and Transferability

• Key Goals:
  - Produce a manual outlining how the tested model for community engaging the community might be replicable in the greater context of related issues for communities in the South Texas Region. The project aims to ultimately answer the following question:
  - Can the case study of a flea market as a concentration for microbusiness development be a model for RCN CE3SAR to design, develop, test, and begin implementing an innovative model for conducting interdisciplinary, region-specific, sustainability research closely tied to the needs and concerns of highly-engaged local stakeholders?
  - The aim of testing this model is to assess how transferability might apply in moving the way we engage the community if there is a need to address sustainability related issues such as disaster recovery, resiliency, etc.
Figure 2:

Fieldwork methodology outlines the steps and sequencing necessary to analyze the study population and economic environment of South Texas via the flea market study. Steps A-D outline Section I: the preliminary observations, surveying that focus on the vendor and consumer population. These steps will inform how to structure Section II, targeted at market management and city officials. The final section, III, culminates in a comprehensive understanding of the market having studied the market, operations, consumers, and vendors. Section III will culminate with the “platica” that will gain from the gathered knowledge from the aforementioned fieldwork research.

Timeline:

- Spring 2015
  - Begin dialogue to establish partnerships with local, public and private partnerships for the process. March, 2015.
  - Begin preliminary fieldwork at the Brownsville Flea market. April, 2015.
Finalize research design. May, 2015.

- Summer 2015
  - Collect primary inventory data on the market vendors and consumers. May, 2015.
  - Interview key informant. May, 2015.
  - Meet with partnerships to discuss their experiences with community engagement to learn from their “best practice” methods and inform the design of the platicas. June & July, 2015.

- Fall 2015
  - Platicas will be planned for October, 2015.
  - Return to meet with partners to discuss results. December, 2015.
  - Delivery report to the co-PI, Dr. Jorge Vanegas. January, 2016.

STAKEHOLDERS AND PARTNERSHIPS

Multiple stakeholders are needed both facilitate the initial fieldwork for the study along the need for their representation as stakeholders in the conversation of engaging a community of vendors at the local flea market in Brownsville, Texas. The following is a list of the partners committed to a collaborative process for developing the project and facilitating the “platicas”:

Texas A&M University
The City of Brownsville Planning Department
Texas Southmost College
77 Flea Market, Brownsville, Texas
Brownsville Economic Development Council
Small Business Administration
Brownsville Wellness Coalition
Brownsville Farmers’ Market
The Mexican Consulate at Brownsville
Texas Workforce Solutions
The White House Initiative Strong Cities Strong Communities (SC2)
Chapter Two: “Platicas,” Frameworks for Local Economic Development
PLATICAS: FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

A series of focus group “platicas,” Spanish for conversations, were designed as a tool to gain a deeper understanding of institutional frameworks shaping the operation of Latino vendor markets in the context of city planning and development. Cameron County was selected for in-depth analysis. A wide scope of constituents from multiple flea and farmers’ markets were targeted for the analysis in order to place this study in context of wider city agendas. The role of markets and vendors were discussed broadly, as a way for the study to explore initial findings and implications from the market fieldwork.

Planning for the “platicas” began through conversations with the City of Brownsville, the primary collaborator. The study proposed facilitating one focus group with all stakeholders at the table. The city’s planning department, however, recommended that three separate meetings take place: one for vendors, one for city leaders, and a third where both sides could come together and discuss views. They saw the “platicas” as an opportunity to help portray issues of perception in relation to planning frameworks for the city from all sides of the spectrum. Faculty and students from the Architecture Program at Texas Southmost College became an essential partner for the “platicas.” Fifteen architecture college students from across the Rio Grande Valley volunteered to serve as discussion leaders and note takers for the focus groups. Their ties to the areas meant they would be familiar with the markets, in addition to being directly involved with the Brownsville Farmers’ Market on a collaborate design-build project to bring market produce to the community. Their participation extended the scope of the focus groups, and helped them to be well structured.

Other considerations for the planning of the “platicas” included the selection of context appropriate venues for each of the meetings. The first “platica,” designed to target local market vendors, was held at a local Catholic Church community center. The second...
leaders and public partners and was held in the Downtown at a city workshop space operated by a non-profit design firm. The third “platica” was held in the downtown as well. Participant stakeholders included: local market vendors, community stakeholders, market management, and city leaders. The following questions were asked:

1. What is the relevance of markets to the local economy?
2. What are the needs for improving vendor opportunities in markets and in the city?
3. What resource opportunities do we have locally to improve micro business ventures in markets and in the city?
4. What could the city do to improve micro business ventures in markets and in the city?

The same set of questions was presented at the first two focus groups, and a synthesis of the responses from both sessions was discussed at the third “platica.” The aim of this third session was to synthesize the response of vendors and city leaders as a mechanism to help develop short and long-term recommendations for improving Latino vendor markets for Brownsville.
2.1. “Platica” 1: Focus group with market vendors

Participants for the first “platica” included: flea market vendors, farmers’ market vendors, small business owners, community members, and staff representatives from the Small Business Administration (SBA). There were a total of fourteen participants, five male and nine female, in addition to six Texas Southmost College (TSC) students that served as table moderators and note takers.
21.1. Question One Response: Market assets

Market vendors stated that markets are a mechanism that facilitates easy access into the economy for small business owners, and create jobs. According to vendors, markets are a means of supporting the local economy by keeping money locally. They emphasized the power that markets have in allowing vendors to feel autonomous as business owners.

2.1.2. Question Two Response: Institutional barriers for markets

Vendor responses regarding barriers revolved around institutional, economic, social, and physical issues. From an institutional perspective they considered that laws and government policy, specifically zoning, permitting, and public health regulations, were an obstacle to vendors. One criticism of the city’s regulatory provisions for businesses was that the city “demands too much.” This critique was prevalent amongst market vendors operating food businesses. However, an assessment of this critique is that strict food regulations are necessary for health and safety reasons. Nevertheless, vendors stated that it should be easier to get through the permitting process to run and operate a food related business in and outside of the market.

Other vendors discussed institutional challenges as they describe their experience in expanding their market stall business on to a storefront, brick-and-mortar business. One vendor described his failed attempt at renovating a building to meet the current restaurant codes for the city. In comparing his experiences to those of other businesses in the city, his perception was that regulations do not apply equally to all businesses as he found permitting to be complicated. However, this could be a product of micro businesses having less access to technical architectural and engineering services than the larger business counterparts. Additionally, business owners are not always well informed, so there is a need to improve
communication across governing agencies and local residents.

Vendors expressed concerns over the limited number of affordable leasing space for start-up businesses in the city. There was critique of land use control set by the owners of private shopping centers, because many do not allow the same business types to lease in one shopping center. For example, if you own a cell phone repair business and wish to lease a storefront, you might only be able to rent at shopping centers where a similar business is currently not leasing. There was an expressed desire for more flexible policies for micro-businesses. Economic obstacles for vendors ranged in scale. One large-scale economic issue is that it is difficult for micro business owners at the markets to compete against larger companies.

At the same time, the consumption patterns of local residents were criticized as the focus group participants said people do not spread their consumption enough, and resort to one-stop shops such as big box stores. Maintaining competition is important, the fear is that when there is less competition for the big businesses, they have the ability to set higher prices. In order for micro business owners to compete with them, they asked for economic flexibility. Two suggestions for addressing these issues were to provide investment opportunities to support micro businesses, and lower taxes for startups. Ultimately, the group considered that being a market vendor is a sacrifice of both money and time for small profit. One vendor said, “Being able to work should be easier.”

Two broader social obstacles that vendors perceived is a need for Brownsville as a whole to be more community focused. If residents saw value in local assets they would make helping each other a priority. Finally, a broad concern was expressed regarding the lack of public transit, and alternative mobility for the city. A way to improve access to the markets, vendors saw the need to improve connectivity to underserved communities.
21.3. Question Three Response: Maximizing local opportunities and resources

Vendors stated “although loans are not ideal, banks set obstacles when you do need them.” In other words, access to credit is a change for vendors. The city of Brownsville, according to the vendors, has human capital, in people that are “capable of working and willing to start a new business.” Financial capital needs to be promoted, while human capital need to be acknowledged. Additionally, vendors saw a need for the city to capitalize on local attractions, and generally perceive the city as a safe place. At a time when the U.S.-Mexico border is faced with crime and political challenges, Brownsville is perceived as a safer city compared to the rest of the border.

2.1.4. Question Four Response: City support and recommendation outlined by vendors

Vendors addressed additional resources city planning could provide from the perspective of economics, mobility, and public health. From an economic angle, vendors suggested that the city could enforce controls to prevent a monopoly of retail venues. In particular, they believe stricter ordinances for big box retailers in the city could help balance the opportunities for micro businesses. Lower taxes, financial assistance, loans, and new business incentives were some of the economic strategies that they considered the city could implement to support small vendors.

Vendors expressed concerns for the fees applied through the Public Health Department for food permitting, in some cases a six-month operating permit was sited to cost up to $1,200. Lowering this fee would help support the survival of these micro businesses. One focus group participant said some vendors or microbusiness owners will chose to locate outside the city limit boundaries, outside the jurisdiction of the city, in order to avoid paying permitting fees.
As vendors are faced with limited resources, one other way the city could alleviate the business financial burden is to assist with advertising. Larger businesses have the resources to advertise on billboards along the highway; the city could provide free advertising venues for micro business owners.

The building stock of the city’s historic downtown was a physical asset in which vendors saw opportunity. Currently underutilized buildings and vacant storefronts could be offered at lower rents to microbusiness owners to help operate their business downtown. Vendors criticized the city for not investing enough on their historic building stock, much of which is owned by the city and has potential to house new businesses.

Suggestions for how the city could address mobility issues were driven primarily by a desire to have well preserved and improved infrastructure to connect to micro businesses to the general population. These improvements were seen necessary for walking environments, streets, and public bus systems. Vendors suggested the option of having smaller busses operate at higher frequencies. They also recommended the city plan at a regional level so that
the Rio Grande Valley could grow together as a region.

The city was seen as a potential leader to promote public health. Vendors recalled a past public health campaign for restaurants called “keep it clean” that was used to remind restaurant owners of the value and need to operate a cleaner business. Vendors suggested a similar campaign be applied to food vending at markets. Additionally, equipment upgrading and renovations could be granted a flexible window to make required changes for compliance. Permit denials place a larger monetary burden on the vendors, so being flexible with them to be sure they become compliant under one permit application could be a financial support to the vendors. Clarifying the language of the city regulations was another suggestion from vendors to the Public Health department.

Vendors suggested the city to hold more public meetings, to actively promote public announcements, and suggested that public meeting be held at accessible hours including different times to ensure that a wide pool of people attend. With public engagement, focus group participants suggested the city allocate funds to support community focus groups such as the “platicas” as a tool to inform the public and gain insights of what the public needs. Vendors saw a need to have more bilingual resources available from the city, and “platicas” are a way to discuss these issues informally in both English and Spanish. They want the city to listen to people that want to start a business, and to be cognizant of the need for flexibility depending on the scale of businesses.

There was a recognized need to see a change in attitude, both from the city leadership and its residents. The participants stated they want to see change, but many times people are not willing to help each other. This need for change in attitude could be addressed through educational campaigns led by the city such as the “Keep Brownsville Beautiful” campaign. Education could also be a tool to address why and how businesses should be in compliance.
2.2. “Platica” Two: Focus group with city leaders and market management

Figure 2.2: City leaders at “Platica” Two

Source: Photo by Author
The second “Platica” included representatives from the following public and non-profit city, county, and federal agencies: Small Business Administration (SBA), City of Brownsville (COB) Planning Department, COB Public Health Department, Texas Workforce Solutions, Mexican Consulate, Brownsville Community Development Corporation, Texas Southmost College, and the Brownsville Economic Development Council. There were a total of nine participants, five male and four females, in addition to five TSC student volunteers that served as moderators and note takes for the focus group.

2.2.1. Question One Response: Market assets

City leaders stated that markets are centers for job creation, and recognized that small businesses are the backbone to the economy. By supporting markets, you support businesses of all scales, in addition to allowing money to stay in the community.

City leaders recognized that markets are a simple, yet affordable way to test a business ideas. They described markets as vehicles for entrepreneurs to “get their feet wet,” while exploring the viability of new products. Markets help vendors have a lower start up cost, and allow them to incrementally learn about profits, loss, and budgeting. Focus group participants recognized potential in promoting things that are “authentic” and “local,” both attributes of markets.

2.2.2. Question Two Response: Institutional barriers for markets

Access to capital is an economic barrier, in particular loans. In addition, the lack of business expertise might discourage vendors from starting or continuing their business venture. City leaders stated that residents in Brownsville suffer from a lack of disposable income, and in many cases this translates to a need to stretch your money as far as possible. Families
therefore shop at big box stores where goods are sold for cheap.

City leaders recognized that people might not know where to start when it comes to accessing information from institutions or government agencies. This lack of information could cause a business to close down. Although information may be posted by the city in a public domain, information might get lost. The city suggested that one of the challenges is that there may be too many targets when thinking of where and how to direct public information. In other words, the city is at a loss as to what to do to address access to information.

Obstacles for vendors also stem from issues of perception. The city leaders stated that there is a lack of trust in authority. Additionally, they felt residents of Brownsville have a general lack of respect for local businesses. “Shop local” is not a prevalent attitude among the community.

2.2.3. Question Three Response: Maximizing Local resources

The representative agencies were able to each outline specific tools or resources their agencies offer. The Small Business Administration (SBA) offers small business boot camps that train entrepreneurs through a series of workshops on idea generation, developing business mission statement, human resources, how to grow a business, and how to become a leader.

The city’s Public Health Department representative stated that they offer a free consultation for new business construction and renovations so businesses know what upgrades are needed to meet code. They also offer a public health checklist to guide vendors through permitting process. They recognized, however, that many people might not be aware of these services. The group discussed that the city needs to be involved with resource support for permitting. A challenge the city sees is that every city has different permitting processes and requirements.
and many times business owners assume that what might pass inspection in a different city would also pass in Brownsville. However, each city is different and has different standards they adhere upon.

The Mexican Consulate stated it acts as a connector by guiding local businesses on how to venture into international markets. The Brownsville Chamber of Commerce has a similar resource available to the general public for connecting with local businesses. The Small Business Development Center (SBDC), a subset of the SBA, offers resources for starting a business. Google sponsored the SBDC’s last series of free workshops. One challenge the group recognized is that many times micro business owners cannot take advantage of these opportunities because they are stretched. He or she might be manage all aspects of the business such as accounting and management, and therefore lacks the necessary time to be a part of free workshops such as these.

The University of Texas of the Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) has a local asset in their business school. Their undergraduate and graduate students could partner with local micro business owners, not only to expose students to a real world experience, but also to support business owner with tools and knowledge they may not have access to. The UTRGV Incubator program is offered to the general public for a small fee to business owners.

The group named the city’s younger generation it’s biggest asset. The city needs to focus on partnerships, as these are key to success. Additionally, they saw the flea and farmer’s markets as city infrastructure for micro businesses that is both attractive and eye pleasing.

2.2.4. Question Four Response: City support and recommendation outlined by the city

City leaders addressed this question around the themes of economics, mobility, public health,
and safety. Sustaining the local economy was a priority for the city. One way to achieve this would be for the city to expand the currently thriving economic sectors. In addition to this, the economic climate for micro business owners could be improved by providing tax incentives or fee waivers at the start of a new business. City leaders suggested it pass new ordinances giving tax incentives to micro businesses. Additionally, the city could help micro business owners expand into e-trade, or virtual markets. It could set up a partnership with college students to help get micro businesses online.

With regard to mobility, the city recognized that infrastructure improvements are needed. However, large improvements are not a short-term change. The city could focus on projects in target areas that could have the greatest impact on micro business development. Infrastructures incentives were a noted priority for the city as well as improved access to public transit.

Public health was also a priority for the city. One participant, however, described the enforcement of public health as “two way street in a dynamic environment.” While there is a need for consistency in the message set forth to the public, the city sees the role of the public in preserving public health as critical. One problem the city recognized is the loss of information from the institutions out to the public. In order to resolve the issues of communication, the city needs clarity in the message it wants to carry across, in addition to a need for leadership to strengthen the public dialogue.

The focus group participants agreed that the city should capitalize on the general perception of Brownsville as a safe city. However, though the public considers the downtown as important, city leaders felt that the public does not consider it as safe as the rest of the city. In return,
we have a downtown struggling to keep businesses afloat struggling with high vacancy rates. Leaders felt the city is relatively safe because there are many levels of law enforcement on the streets, from local to federal policing. However, city leaders thought they could improve the perception of safety by reintroducing neighborhood watch programs that used to be more prevalent. Overall, the city needs more community-focused programs.

The group addressed a variety of planning policy recommendations that could begin to foster the development of microbusinesses and markets. The city needs to clarify its regulations, “we are a patchwork of ordinances like many other cities.” The group asked to focus on challenges in order to deliver clear goals leveling the playing field of perceptions from the institutional side and the general public.

City leaders discussed the possibility of expanding and building on what is currently working. For example, the city flea market is currently the only place where food trucks are allowed. The focus group participants saw potential in expanding the food truck culture to the city and develop food truck parks.

The group insisted that if the city’s downtown is not preserved, then there is no city. The existing building stock and vacancies in the downtown could be leased to microbusiness owners to revitalize the downtown. The city should incentives businesses in the downtown that gather people such as coffee shops, bookstores, and pharmacies. One way to address this is to propose a small business development zone in the downtown.

Ultimately, the city needs to decide how engaged it wants to be. They stated that public opinion is key to generating new policy, and a bottom-up approach is necessary. Additionally, developing an entrepreneurial ecosystem could be a way of supporting micro business development through institutional frameworks.
2.3. “Platica” Three: Developing support-frameworks for markets

A total of fifteen people participated in the third “platica:” nine market and institutional representatives, two males and seven females, in addition to six TSC students. These students that had previously served as table moderators participated in the summary discussions. The third “platica” revisited the focus group questions discussed during the first two “platicas.” The summary session presented each question with the responses from vendor and city leaders, in addition to outlining overlaps in response.

Following the summary two “platicas”, faculty and students from TSC had an opportunity to present an ongoing project and collaboration with the Brownsville Farmers’ Market. As mentioned, the architecture studio designed and built a mobile market cart as a pilot prototype for addressing lack of healthy food access in hard to reach, low-income communities. While the farmers’ market is open every Saturday, the students saw an opportunity to make it accessible during the week through the mobile model. Additionally, this was a way to reduce waste for vendors by guaranteeing the market cart sold their left over produce. Their presentation was catalyst during the focus group for discussing the value of public-private partnerships and community outreach.
Finally, the group brainstormed on the top priorities for supporting microbusinesses and markets. The conversation stressed that listing of priorities should disregard feasibility; these could later be evaluated as either long or short-term goals. Additionally, the reporting of this priority assessment could be shared with agencies and local partners present as a framework for adapting changes for the city. The following summary outlines planning priorities revolved around the themes of economics, local and regional planning, and educational resources.
2.3.1. Economic Development Planning

In addressing the lack of capital, the group stressed how the economic vulnerability of the local population is sometimes taken advantage of through predatory lending. According to a representative of a local non-profit, the money that lenders are capturing through interest and defaulted loans ranges in the millions of dollars. A community member suggested the city should place restrictions on them and follow the example of other cities that have actually banned their operation inside their jurisdiction as a way of protecting vulnerable populations. A participant noted that Brownsville did pass a similar ordinance, however not much has changed. Predatory lenders are still in operation around the city. The suggestion was to therefore strengthen the ordinance. The question was then brought up of why some businesses can operate without full enforcement of the law, and small businesses are penalized the second they are non-compliant. A representative from the city called it “selective enforcement.”

Services that allow for microbusinesses to share resources could address lack of capital. Advertising, in particular, is a service commodity that that many time microbusiness owners cannot afford, yet it is seen as necessary resource for the survival of new businesses. According to the group, the problem is that many times support stems from having good credit, and if you don’t have that how do you help your business. Banks wants to do business and grant people loans, however they want low risk. National banks could partner with the city to bring resources and training for microbusinesses. Many have programs for give back to the local community through business training for small business owners.

Some suggested the city be proactive in learning from other cities. Learning from other programs would help the city bring new ideas to implement locally. For example, the city of Mission developed an initiative called “Ruby Red Ventures.” This is a venture capital fund that
began as a way to support local businesses, including food businesses. Microbusiness owners use the money from this fund to help develop and commercialize their new product ideas. A number of those have successfully been endorsed through HEB and are now distributed across the state. Brownsville could develop a similar funding program. Many times, state and federal resource are complicated; the city should work to be approachable. According to a city representative, Brownsville spends millions in recruiting large businesses to the region. Therefore starting a venture capital fund of $200,000 is feasible.

2.3.2. Local vs. Regional

Planning strategies should address both local and regional challenges. The groups discussed that cities in the valley have a perception that they are all different making planning at the regional level difficult to achieve. More specifically, this is an issue with limited comprehensive approaches at the regional scale. For example, the shift of the university to a regional model has marginalized students that are already a hard to reach population with limited resources. At the same time there is a need to improve transit and connectivity locally and regionally. As mentioned, the perception that “local” is not good is prevalent in the region. The group discussed that whenever a major food retailer opens, lines are out the door, however this type of turn out and the community do not happen for locally owned businesses. The perception is that having national chains makes the city different, and perhaps better. “For years we have been taught that being like others is better, we have been told that ours is not good enough, for years we have absorbed this and we believe it.” This is the result of wanting to be like others. People see that this is a part of becoming American.

One participant stated that the challenge is not to change our culture; the goal should be to reinforce it. Residents should say, “I am from the south, I am from the border, I am from Brownsville, and I am proud of it.” This can be addressed by developing a campaign that local
Small business Saturday, sponsored by American Express, is a national initiative that could be implemented in the city. This is an event that happens once a year in counter of “Black Friday.” The city could provide free transit so residents can ride the bus to the local markets. Additionally, free parking could be offered downtown for that day.

Brownsville can learn from models such as the city of Harlingen that has worked to bring local businesses and people back to the downtown. One critique by of the group was that although Harlingen has a diversity of businesses operating, their streets are clean and walkable, they do not have people walking their streets. Brownsville on the other hand has a busy downtown, in the daytime, with a large foot traffic coming over from Mexico to shop. Its local shops are of low quality goods but there is critical mass of pedestrians. The downtown is not seen as part of the city. The local perception is that the downtown is not safe, although the city as a whole is seen as safe. Brownsville needs to showcase its history, embrace being on border, and promote that it is safe.

The group discussed current changes to the downtown including new incubator program that will offer co-working spaces for startups. UTRGV graduates started this program as a private venture. However, the group stressed that the city should incentivize the formation of more of these types of programs to the city core.

### 2.3.3. Business Resources and Education

In addressing business resources and education for microbusinesses, the city might need a third party organization to be their face and endorsement. If there is a lack of trust between business owners and the city, and vise versa, having this other entity to be the mediator could help resolve the issues of perception and increase trust.
The city suggested having a program to help business owners know where to best locate their new business. The group discussed how private property owners do not allow the same business type to lease in one shopping center, therefore limiting the business owner’s options for rental space. The city representative said they were not aware of this rule.

Participants suggested there is a need for a “one stop shop” at the city’s planning department to help people wanting to start or expand a business. This service could save people time and money. The City of San Antonio was suggested as a model to study. The SBA and SBDC are agencies that are designed to be a link to resources. However, the group critiqued them for being hard to reach. “Where are they? How do their programs work? These are things people in other agencies should know but we don’t.” A response to this was that the government agencies are not the target population for the SBA, and the hope is that the general public is aware of their services, however the concern among the group is that they don’t. If the SBA and the SBDC need support in getting the word out, they could partner with the university or the community college and use students as a resource.

Even though one-stop shop are important, some suggested that at some point the information needs to approach people. This is an issue of continuity from support systems offered by the city. There are many areas in Brownsville, such as the Southmost neighborhood, with high concentrations of low-income population and they are unaware of public services. Non-profit representatives stated that one program that has worked well is the use of “Promotoras” from the school of Rural and Public Heath at Texas A&M University as a tool to expose the community to programs. “We have to go to the people, having a one stop shop cannot possibly be enough.”

One community member stated that many times people are not aware of the services that the government has and resources get lost because they are not being taken advantage of. In Mexico there is a service called “Mercado Sobre Ruedas,” mobile markets. The Mercado
(market in Spanish) brings fresh food, clothing, and services to a community one day a week. The community stated that the government has a role in defusing the programs they have to its people.

Additionally, the group discussed that the city is in need of public health education for the general public. This could be done through a “Keep it clean” campaign. A city representative called for understanding this under a resiliency framework. Residents should be aware of the impacts that each action they take will have on the safety and health of the city’s environments.
Chapter Three: Conclusion
3.1 Conclusion

In the context of Latino vendor markets, the “platicas” are a case study for understanding values. They specifically targeted an understanding of the economy that impacts people at the market, and how this micro economy impacts the city as a whole. Through this approach, the study begins to understand values as they relate to the urban context.

The focus group approach was able to put the case study market as one more player in the context of city planning issues. This was evident in that the discussions were not about how to improve the Seventy Seven Flea market or the farmers’ market; instead they centered on how to improve the circumstances for micro-vendors in general.

Parallels in what vendors and institutions perceived as assets, barriers, and opportunities for markets were clear, yet there is disconnect in the output. The local context in planning for Latino vendor markets may be a product of miscommunication and resource limitations, however the overlap in their vision is a platform for developing a framework for change.

3.1.1 Resources

Resource is defined as a form of material asset or an action adapted under adverse circumstances; it’s origins stem from the phrase to rise again. Resources in the context of micro-businesses can be seen as a lifeline to opportunity for survival. Through the “platicas,” vendors discussed the challenges facing their operations in addition to contrasting the scale of impact of resources for microbusinesses compared to large businesses.

Policy is a framework and political structure that should operate as a resource for the city. However, the city recognizes that navigation of city policies is difficult for its vendors, and it
is at a loss for how to address this disconnect. A proposed “one-stop-shop” could potentially give clarity to the general public by making information more accessible. While the proposal was developed both vendors and the city, a critique was that the city should do more then facilitate information; it should go to the local people.

In addressing policy and city regulations, one specific challenge for microbusinesses is meeting minimum standards for compliance. For this process, sourcing professional services such as engineering and architectural consulting often become a financial burden. When a business fails due to such limitations, it is not the product of discrimination on the part of the city; however, the city should address the gap in opportunity by developing support services for microbusinesses.

Resource reciprocity is a relationship of assets, and exists at multiple scales in understanding markets in the city context. Firstly, a market is an accessible platform of opportunity for microbusiness development, and gateways into the economy. Secondly, vendors define themselves as a resource for the city, principally as human capital, and emphasized the power that markets have in allowing vendors to feel autonomous. Thirdly, looking at vendors as an agglomeration and not the individual level, the case study analysis shows that the services of the grouping act as lifelines to its constituents. Thus, the mutual benefit is a derivative of this market to vendor relation. The amenities they provide such as legal services, repair shops, health care, and telecommunications, have significance for the welfare of those it services city. However, resources from the city for this group are lacking.

A key lesson from the “platicas” was that people want to be listened to. The city recognizes the role of micro economies and markets in the city, but through conversations it was evident that vendors do not feel valued. The city named the younger generation the city’s biggest asset. This too is human capital. It is a resource to be capitalized and nurtured by the city.
Cultivating the human capital asset of both young and older generations begins with the city. It should recognize that financial capital is needed to promote entrepreneurship, while at the same time acknowledging to the people that they are indeed valued.

The figure below diagrams the concept of resource reciprocity and the gap in the feedback loop from the side of the public sector to individual market vendors (See Figure 1.4). Services for vendors could be in the form of financial and policy literacy. Resources for business development could be given by the private sector through partnerships with financial lenders. As mentioned, assistance with code compliance and policy literacy could be addressed through an approachable one-stop-shop of resources.

![Figure 1.4: Resource Reciprocity](image)

Source: Created by Author
3.1.2. Upward Mobility

Resources, as explained, are tools necessary for the survival of businesses. They have the potential to catalyze change, and impact financial capacity. Upward mobility, both social and economic, is therefore a potential result of the use of resources. One example of the relationship of resource to upward mobility is potential expansion of market-based microbusiness onto a more permanent locale.

A central discussion of the focus groups pertained to the use of city resources to support vendors seeking business expansion. Building stock, including publically owned, is underutilized in downtown Brownsville. It is a physical asset that could begin to balance resource reciprocity between the city and microbusiness owners as vendors could benefit from subsidized leasing space, and the city is in dire need of downtown revitalization.

The downtown has a stigma of lack of safety as a product of abandonment. To get people into the downtown to become a 24-hour district, the city should incentive businesses that induce people clusters such as coffee shops, pharmacies, and bookstore. Critics might qualify this strategy as a form of gentrification, however addressing a state of austerity merits an intervention that could catalyze change without displacement. Instead, the asset of critical mass seen at the markets is an asset that could transplant users to into the city core. Bringing microbusinesses into the downtown is a strategy with potential long-term impacts. However, this transition of businesses from one venue to another does not imply the demise of the first. Instead, the relationship between the market and storefront venues should be seen as stepping-stones for business development. The market plays a role in providing easy access to the economy for vendors. If some leave the market to expand in other locations, it
can be assumed that others will continue to take advantage of the opportunity at the market and replace those who left.

Microbusiness owners may not all aspire to this form of business expansion. However, providing opportunities to facilitate upward mobility should be a vested interest of the city. It needs to define its role in the support and regulation of micro economies in the city. Additionally, it should be aware of the role private sector has in controlling microbusinesses.

Brownsville, like many cities, regulates its spatial structure through land use controls. Through discussion between the city and business owners, it was clear that the state was relieving itself from the responsibility of land use control by giving enforcement power to private landowners. More specifically, vendors pointed out that private shopping center owners self regulate for competition. The relationship of market owners and microbusinesses wishing to operate at the market is similar. The markets are privately owned and they have the power to regulate the operations of the microbusinesses on site. The city must therefore decide be cognizant of the role of the private sector and strategies for mechanism to alleviate the playing field for microbusinesses through the public sector.
“PLATICAS”
on Local Economic Development

Who: Join us for two workshops focused on improving local economic development through opportunities for markets vendors in Brownsville, Texas.

When:

Workshop 2:  
Tuesday November 10, 10am-1pm  
BC Workshop, Meeting Room  
609 11th St, Brownsville, TX 78520

Workshop 3:  
Monday November 16, 6pm-9pm  
BC Workshop, Meeting Room  
609 11th St, Brownsville, TX 78520

Who: Market managers, local leaders, or community partners for economic development are welcomed.

Registration is FREE! Please visit our website:  
http://www.arch.tamu.edu/diversity/events/platicas/

or Call: 956-466-1867

Join us, there will be FREE FOOD!
PLATICAS

Para Desarrollo Económico Local

Que: Acompáñanos a dos talleres enfocados en mejorar el desarrollo economic local por medio de oportunidades para vendedores de los mercados en Brownsville, Texas.

Cuando:

Taller 2: Martes Noviembre 10, 10am-1pm
BC Workshop, Salon de Juntas
609 11th St, Brownsville, TX 78520

Taller 3: Lunes Noviembre 16, 6pm-9pm
BC Workshop, Salon de Juntas
609 11th St, Brownsville, TX 78520

Quien: Gerentes de mercados, líderes locales, o socios para el desarrollo económico son bienvenidas.

Registro es GRATIS! visite nuestra pagina del internet:
http://www.arch.tamu.edu/diversity/events/platicas/

o Llame al: 956-466-1867

Acompáñanos, habrá COMIDA GRATIS.
“PLATICAS”
on Local Economic Development

Who: Join us for two workshops focused on how to improve economic opportunities for local market vendors in Brownsville, Texas.

When:

Workshop 1:  
**Monday November 9, 6pm–9pm**  
St. Joseph Church, San Juan Hall  
555 W St Francis St, Brownsville, TX 78520

Workshop 3:  
**Monday November 16, 6pm–9pm**  
BC Workshop, Meeting Room  
609 11th St, Brownsville, TX 78520

Who: All market vendors (from the “Pulgas” or Farmers’ Markets) are welcomed.

Registration is FREE! Please visit our website:
http://www.arch.tamu.edu/diversity/events/platicas/

or Call: 956-466-1867

Join us, there will be **FREE DINNER!**
PLATICAS

Para Desarrollo Económico Local

Que: Acompáñanos a dos talleres enfocados en mejorar las oportunidades económicas de vendedores de los mercados en Brownsville, Texas.

Cuando:

Taller 1: Lunes Noviembre 9, 6pm-9pm
St. Joseph Church, San Juan Hall
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Taller 3: Lunes Noviembre 16, 6pm-9pm
BC Workshop, Salon de Juntas
609 11th St, Brownsville, TX 78520

Quien: Todo vendedor de mercados (Las Pulgas o Farmers’ Markets) es bienvenido.

Registracion es GRATIS! visite nuestra pagina del internet:
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o Llame al: 956-466-1867

Acompáñanos, habrá CENA GRATIS!