



FOOD POLICY COUNCILS: LESSONS LEARNED

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The logo for Food First, featuring the words "Food First" in a stylized, handwritten-style font.

Executive Summary

As the food and financial crises bring fresh urgency to concerns over hunger, food access, public health, labor and economic development – citizens and governments are beginning to connect these issues back to the food system as a whole. Councils are springing up across North America to “connect the dots”¹ between the growing number of neighborhood food initiatives and communities forging policies for just, healthy food systems.

Food Policy Councils act as both forums for food issues and platforms for coordinated action. The first Food Policy Council started in 1982 in Knoxville, Tennessee. Since then Food Policy Councils have been established at state, local and regional levels across the country. Some have remarkable success stories. Others have failed, disbanded, or spun-off into other service and non-profit organizations.

What lessons can be taken from North America’s three-decade experiment in formulating local food policy? *Food Policy Councils: Lessons Learned* is an assessment based on an extensive literature review and testimony from 48 individual interviews with the people most involved in Food Policy Councils.

Local and State Food Policies

Local and state governments are the testing ground for innovative policy ideas that often become part of the national norm. They are also the places where we as citizens and well-informed organizations can have the most influence.

Food Policy consists of the actions *and in-actions* by government that influence the supply, quality, price, production, distribution, and consumption of food. What government doesn’t do, whether by design or neglect, is as much a policy as a specific action like a city regulation that prescribes the location of farmers markets or a state statute that protects farmland.

Instead of one single place where one might address the wide range of “seed to table” items that make up our food system, food work is spread across numerous governmental departments and functions. City and state transportation departments, for instance, can promote or deter sprawl, which affects farmland, and make it less difficult for people who depend on public transportation to reach a supermarket. Local school districts can purchase food from local farmers, restrict access by students to vending machines that dispense unhealthy food, and increase food education to promote healthy eating behaviors. Economic development officials can provide incentives to developers to locate supermarkets in underserved areas, assist with the establishment of food processing facilities and other infrastructure, or more generally account for the contribution that food and farming make to their local or state economies. Health departments can promote healthier eating through menu labeling or community-wide education programs, and social service agencies can distribute nutrition benefits such as food stamps to needy households. But these and other governmental institutions are not typically linked to each other around a common food system vision or set of goals any more than they are linked to the private sector. While his kind of “silo-ing” can lead to numerous dysfunctions, it also offers enormous opportunities to pursue coordinated and comprehensive food policies once an effort is made to connect the “silos.”



City Slicker Farms, Photo: Rebecca Meyer

Why Food Policy Councils?

For decades, the failings of our food system have been seen as isolated problems, to be dealt with by a fragmented array of government and non-governmental agencies at the state and local level. Until Food Policy Councils, these failings were largely being treated separately. Food Policy Councils began as a way to address the food system as a whole, often bringing the weight of local, county or state government behind grassroots initiatives. Food Policy Councils work across sectors, engaging with government policy and programs, grassroots/non-profit projects, local businesses and food workers. Instead of many advocates working on the isolated symptoms of a failing food system, Food Policy Councils attempt to establish platforms for coordinated action at the local level. In fact, most of the councils we spoke with were created at the behest of community organizations that identified policy barriers to their work, and pushed for a Food Policy Council to create a context to better facilitate their activities.

What is a Food Policy Council?

A Food Policy Council (FPC) consists of a group of representatives and stakeholders from many sectors of the food system. Ideally, the councils include participants representing all five sectors of the food system (production, consumption, processing, distribution and waste recycling). They often include anti-hunger and food justice advocates, educators, non-profit organizations, concerned citizens, government officials, farmers, grocers, chefs, workers, food processors and food distributors. Food Policy Councils create an opportunity for discussion and strategy development among these various interests, and create an arena for studying the food system as a whole. Because they are often initiated by government actors, through executive orders, public acts or joint resolutions, Food Policy Councils tend to enjoy a formal relationship with local, city or state officials.

The central aim of most Food Policy Councils is to identify and propose innovative solutions to improve local or state food systems, spurring local economic development and making food systems more environmentally sustainable and socially just. To this end, FPCs often engage in food system research and make policy recommendations, and can even be charged with writing food policy. Because no U.S. cities or states have agencies devoted explicitly to food (and since there is no federal “Department of Food”), FPCs can improve coordination between government agencies whose policies influence the food system. FPCs can also give voice to the concerns of various stakeholders and serve as public forums for the discussion of key food system issues. In this capacity, they help to ensure that food policy is democratic and reflects the diverse needs and perspectives of the food system’s various constituents.² They can also help to build relationships between government, non-profit and private sector organizations. Additionally, Food Policy Councils often play an active role in educating policy makers and the public about the food system.

Function and Structure of Food Policy Councils

Councils generally have four functions:

- + To serve as forums for discussing food issues,
- + To foster coordination between sectors in the food system,
- + To evaluate and influence policy, and
- + To launch or support programs and services that address local needs.

Not all Food Policy Councils take on all four functions. However, these four functions are often integrated – for example in programs connecting local farmers and co-ops directly to food banks and school lunch programs.

Forum for Food Issues - Food Policy Councils can be described as umbrella organizations in which diverse members of the food movement participate. They create space for dialog. Additionally, Food Policy Councils attempt to work from a food systems perspective, integrating and balancing the various issues and interests that shape the food system.³

Foster Coordination Between Sectors - In taking a food systems approach, FPCs commit themselves to working across the full range of food sectors – from production to consumption and recycling. How well each of these sectors is represented and whether FPCs improve communication between the five sectors (production, consumption, processing, distribution and waste) varies widely among Food Policy Councils.

Policy- Within government, Food Policy Councils' roles include those of research, oversight, advising and advocating for specific policies. They can also help identify areas that government has not been able to address, and either propose a change in government policy or identify the need for a non-governmental organization (NGO) to initiate a new program. In this role FPCs have the opportunity to bridge the divisions in public policy making – representing food issues to sectors of government that might be unaware of the effect of their mandates, policies and actions on health, nutrition and the environment.⁴

Programs - Food Policy Councils, despite their name, have often focused on implementing programs – working to tackle the issues themselves, rather than sticking exclusively to policy advising. Direct experience in the food system can inform policy making, and many newer FPCs (of which there are many) feel that they need greater experience as a basis for proposing policy recommendations. Many programs that councils launch can be one-time successes, such as getting food stamps accepted at farmers markets, creating school breakfast programs, building affordable housing for farm workers or securing land for community gardens. Other programs actually spin-off into new organizations that continue to work on a specific issue area.

Structure

There is no one right way for a council to be structured, but there are trade-offs for each variation. Understanding these trade-offs will help councils strike the right balance to meet their own needs and goals. Organizational structure varies from councils that are housed as part of government agencies to councils that are formed as entirely independent grassroots networks; from groups that depend entirely on volunteer time to groups dependent on foundation funding; and from those that strive for consensus-based decision making to those that abide by majority rules.

Some of the trends in organizational structure are as follows:

Staffing - Our data suggests that the vast majority of FPCs have either no staff at all or only one part-time staff person, relying instead on volunteers or on restricted amounts of staff time from city, county or state employees assigned to the council in addition to their usual government duties. The lack of staff is a key challenge for many councils, and can cause councils to dissolve.

Connection to government – Half of state level FPCs are government agencies, and some of those that are not actually part of government were created by government action. On the other hand, most county and local level FPCs are entirely independent of government.

Representation of food system sectors – Most councils have representation from at least the consumption, distribution and production sectors of the food system. Representation from the waste management and food processing sectors is less common.

Selection of members – At the state level, two-thirds of Food Policy Councils have their members appointed, with the remaining FPCs allowing members to self select. At the county level, about 14% of FPCs have their members appointed, with all other FPCs evenly split between self-selection, election/nomination and application. At the local level, more than half of FPCs have their members self-select, 36% appoint their members and 10% have prospective members apply for seats.

Leadership and decision making – Food Policy Councils range from informal groups without steering committees; to more formal groups with a chair and executive committee. These more formal groups sometimes include several subcommittees that specialize in researching and making recommendations in a certain area.

Funding - One of the most significant aspects to note about the funding sources for FPCs is that a large number of FPCs have no funding at all, and survive as all-volunteer organizations. Eight percent of state level FPCs, 14% of county level FPCs and 28% of local level FPCs have no funding. The largest funding source for state level FPCs is government. For county level FPCs, the largest funding source is individual donations (i.e. funding from interested individuals), and for local level FPCs, the top funding source is grants from private foundations.

The number of FPCs at all levels – state, county and local – has been steadily growing over the last decade, with over 40 active councils nation-wide.

Common First Steps

Kenneth Dahlberg in his studies of Food Policy Councils says councils often spend the first three to four years getting to know their local food system.⁵ While this is clearly important, across the spectrum of interviewees, having a first success has helped new councils to build momentum, community buy-in and political legitimacy.” Or as Wayne Roberts puts it, “as you build credibility and support, you can move on to the high-falutin areas of policy.”⁶

A common first step of new councils has been to conduct a food systems assessment. Often Food Policy Councils themselves are born out of this process. Similarly, pushing for a city, state or community food charter has both birthed councils and been a founding activity.

Other councils worked towards getting electronic benefits transfer machines (food stamps) into farmers markets, expanding the number of city or local farmers markets, changing the regulations for school food purchasing and piloting farm to school programs.

Building New Councils

There is no one secret to success for Food Policy Councils. There are however some common needs. In order to change food policy, FPCs need to be taken seriously by the governmental bodies and other institutions they hope to influence. FPCs need government staff or officials to buy into their existence and mandate. This can take several forms – a city council could pass a resolution recognizing and supporting the FPC; officials or influential people could be seated on the council; or government could provide funding, meeting places or other support. Attempting to influence government policy without these relationships is likely to be quite difficult.

FPCs embedded in government may have an easier time getting access to (at least part-time) paid staff, and other resources like meeting space.⁷ However, food policy councils that exist independent of government may have more leeway to be critical of existing policy, while FPCs that are embedded in government may need to be more cautious in their approaches to criticizing existing policy.⁸

When a council is just getting started, it can be helpful to pursue some sort of “quick win” project. Rebecca Schiff points out in *Food Policy Councils: An Examination of Organizational Structure, Process and Contribution to Alternative Food Movements* that “meaningful tasks that can be (and are) accomplished within a relatively short time frame help to build credibility for an organization along with member motivation and pride.”⁹

It can be useful to strike a balance between initiating programs and specific policies that build momentum and credibility, and addressing the structural issues at play in a given food system. Too great a focus on structural issues threatens to mire councils in unproductive national and even international debates, while too narrow a focus on specific program outcomes may limit the council’s larger policy impact.

Challenges

There are a few key areas where many Food Policy Councils have encountered challenges, limitations and points of tension. Many of these challenges offer new councils lessons for strategic development. Others have no clear resolution, but are important to keep in mind as councils plan their activities.

Broadly, we see these challenges as:

- ✦ Achieving and working with diverse membership and constituencies
- ✦ Working in complex political climates
- ✦ Designing an effective organizational structure
- ✦ Obtaining adequate funding
- ✦ Balancing focus between policy and program work and between structural and specific foci
- ✦ Adequately evaluating a council's impact

Evaluating the impact of a council's activities is of particular importance. In this study we were unable to quantitatively demonstrate the impact of Food Policy Councils on food access, food policy, public health, or economic development due to a lack of data or evaluation procedures within individual councils, despite numerous success stories. As the momentum behind Food Policy Councils grows, there is a clear need to evaluate the effectiveness of councils in meeting their stated goals, and their broader effect on the food system as a whole.

Since the first Food Policy Council was established in Knoxville, TN in 1982, some FPCs have been established, only to cease operating several years later. While circumstances were different for every council, there are a few "red flags" to watch out for:

- ✦ Dependence on one strong personality, organization, or political figure
- ✦ Lack of funding
- ✦ "Single-issue" focus
- ✦ Over-commitment to specific programs

Potentials of the FPC Model

The full potential of Food Policy Councils is difficult to assess. There is no way to know how many Food Policy Councils have dissolved or disbanded, nor is there adequate information to assess the impacts councils have had on specific food systems. What we do have is a collection of case studies and experience that still points to a powerful overall trend. Citizens and neighborhoods have begun to directly influence the policies of their local food systems, creating a context in which equitable and sustainable alternatives for ensuring access to good, healthy food are allowed to flourish. Food Policy Councils, at least anecdotally, are changing the rules to encourage these alternatives to scale up into government, scale out geographically and "scale in" to local neighborhoods.

This model is in many ways still in its infancy, but the model itself, based on our literature review and interview data, shows five key potentials:

- ✦ Potential to address public health through improving food access, addressing hunger and food insecurity, and

improving the quality of available food

- Potential to affect national and state level policy debates
- Potential to connect multiple sectors that wouldn't otherwise work together
- Potential to bring local food policy into mainstream politics
- Potential to boost local economies and combat poverty

All of these key potentials lead to one central idea – that Food Policy Councils have the potential to democratize the food system. The failings of our current food system are largely suffered in neighborhoods and constituencies with little political or economic voice. Food Policy Councils can amplify the voices of underserved communities that have traditionally had limited access to power. The Detroit Food Policy Council for example, made addressing the underlying racial and economic disparities in food access, retail ownership, food sector jobs and control over food-producing resources a cornerstone of their policy platform – explicitly attacking structural racism inherent in the food system and creating space for greater economic democracy and food justice.

Similarly, the power of food systems to boost local economies is overlooked. In one study, Ken Meter estimated a single region in Northwest Wisconsin lost \$1.13 billion a year in potential wealth through the food economy.¹⁰ In assessing the food economy of the Chesapeake Bay region, Meter found that a 15% increase in local food purchases would bring in three times more dollars to farming communities than Federal subsidies currently bring to the region. A WorldWatch Study estimated that if the greater Seattle area were to source just 20% of its food locally, it would inject an extra billion dollars per year into the city's economy.¹¹ To many, those "food dollars" represent an opportunity to capture more wealth in the community.

As the power of Food Policy Councils at the local, county, and state levels builds, councils may be able to form a national coalition to take on larger national and structural issues.

Discussion and Recommendations

Perhaps the most interesting result of this study is that there is no one recipe for a successful council. Across the country, policies and activities that have been successful in, for example, New Mexico, may not have been tried in New York. Councils cannot necessarily apply a specific formula from another locality. Food Policy Councils do best when they build off the momentum of groups in their own communities, when they address issues for which the need for change has already been locally identified, and when they come up with locally-based policies and programs. The strength of food policy councils lies in their ability to be locally relevant.

This strength also presents a key challenge: while the Food Policy Council *form* is promising, the specific *functions* of the council are not necessarily clearly defined, and change from case to case. Unless a specific strategic plan, evaluation model, decision making model and a strong understanding of the local food system are in place, councils may have a promising form, and still not function well.

While success stories are as diverse as the communities that create them, the challenges facing councils have been much the same over a broad geographic and time scale. Challenges with funding and staff time, over-commitment, dependence on a strong personality or political figure, and to a lesser degree, having a single issue focus, have been recurring themes continent-wide.

There are several key recommendations that may help councils confront some of these challenges. When establishing a Food Policy Council, it has been helpful to:

- ✦ Engage members across different sectors of the food system and from different socio-economic backgrounds and draw from a diverse, but organized base
- ✦ Establish priorities and agree on some kind of a strategic plan from the outset
- ✦ Establish clear structures for decision-making, communication and evaluation from the beginning
- ✦ Examine structural trade offs between being within or independent of government, how the council is funded, and what issues the council chooses to prioritize
- ✦ Include elements of self-education (for members) and the public
- ✦ Diversify political and internal leadership support
- ✦ Evaluate and monitor the effects of the councils' policies and/or activities

Similarly, some councils recommend:

- ✦ Being “positive energy” organizations, becoming as doers and problem solvers, and working *for* the creation of positive alternatives instead of exclusively fighting *against* the current system
- ✦ Maintaining good relationships with local (and state) government. Whether a council is independent of government or housed within a government agency, buy-in from local officials is key.
- ✦ Starting small—Food Policy Councils are still young and building credibility. Many have identified “quick wins” and are striving to establish a good track record before taking on larger structural issues. Mark Winne notes that councils “tend to look at things that we can influence, like getting a law or regulation passed or more funding - that’s the reality that practicality tends to circumscribe the work of Food Policy Councils while bigger issues take longer and become research items”
- ✦ Balancing programs and services with larger policy changes. Creating successful programs can address immediate needs while indirectly changing the policy context of a food system. This can help build credibility needed to address larger structural issues later on.

As councils spring up around the country, establishing clear metrics for evaluation, including the impact of councils on public health, job creation, and economic development, will be increasingly important. In the course of this study, these questions were raised, but not answered. If we assume that evaluation proves that Food Policy Councils play a valuable role, then it will become much easier for governments and foundations to underwrite the expansion of these councils into many more communities, to establish state wide coordinating bodies and, ultimately, to lobby for national coordination and funding. The Community Food Security Coalition has begun to provide resources and network councils and the Drake Agricultural Law Center has provided key institutional support. We imagine that as the number of councils around North America grows, this work will be increasingly important and can have a strong impact on the overall success of Food Policy Councils.

What people refer to as “the food movement” is actually a collection of social movements: food justice, fair food, fair trade, organic food, slow food, food security, public health, food sovereignty, family farms... and local folks just trying to make things better. The list is extensive because the problems with our food systems are extensive, systemic and acute. While these groups have much in common, it would be naïve to think they coordinate their actions. Food Policy Councils are just one expression of this “movement of movements.” Nevertheless, FPCs have a unique quality within this wide array of activists, advocates and practitioners: they create *democratic spaces for convergence in diversity*. The power of informed, democratic convergence—especially when linked to the specific *places* where people live, work and eat—has an additional, emergent quality: it can change the way we—and others—think. This is social learning, the basis for social change. Food Policy Councils hold great potential as action centers for the social learning needed to build democracy into the food system. By helping communities exercise agency over the parts of the food system that people do have the power to change, and by building political will for deeper, systemic change, Food Policy Councils are “making the road as we travel” towards better local food systems.

This study is the result of many voices, some new, some experienced, all committed to fair, healthy food systems for all. We thank all of those who participated. By sharing these voices—and in adding our own—we hope that we can contribute to both the national food debate and to the growing body of knowledge informing food system change. The experiences of Food Policy Councils are wide-ranging and growing quickly. Despite our best efforts to be inclusive of people, experiences, ideas and opinions, we are sure we missed more than we caught. We present this work, not as a definitive statement on Food Policy Councils, but as an invitation for reflection and research among those concerned with food policy. Food Policy Councils have much to contribute, and we all have much to learn. We hope this report provides an opportunity to do both.