

Before exploring what food policy councils are and the types of activities they engage in, it is important to first understand the broader context of the urban food systems within which they operate.

The challenge of feeding 21st century cities

Food systems, understood as the ways that food is produced, processed, distributed, consumed, and disposed, have historically played a central role in cities. Beyond providing nourishment, food and food systems have often come to represent a society's beliefs and struggles with social redistribution, justice, and democracy itself.

Over the past half century, a number of factors have combined to break down the connections between cities and food. These factors include intensive rural-to-urban migration, loss of productive land, intensive mechanized farming, and refrigeration, which allows for long-distance food transportation. Added to these pressures are global issues including climate change, environmental degradation, and public health crises (not only hunger but also obesity and other preventable diseases).

Urban food systems: A concern for all

In response to these challenges and in recognition of how central food is to the health and well-being of our cities, food systems are making a comeback as an issue of major significance. Recent decades have seen a surge in demands from urban dwellers to participate in community gardens, farmers' markets, urban orchards, community kitchens, and community food events as well as take part in canning and preserving workshops, keep backyard hens, and participate in education programs about where their food comes from.

The renewed interest in urban food systems means that new processes and mechanisms are being developed to make decisions about food and encourage governments and citizens to actively participate in how these decisions are implemented in communities. After all, food policies (referring to decisions and implementation tools related to the food system) affect opportunities to grow food in the city, the ability of all citizens to access nutritious and affordable food at grocery stores or farmers' markets, and the ability to manage food waste, among other sustainability and health concerns. Although many mechanisms have emerged to help re-think urban food systems, one of the most effective is said to be the creation of food policy councils.

What is a food policy council?

A food policy council (FPC) is a voluntary body made up of stakeholders from across the food system. Typically, the mandate of a FPC is to examine how a food system operates and provide ideas, actions, and policy recommendations on how to improve it.

FPCs typically include representatives from across the food system: producers, processors, distributors, and food waste managers. They can include stakeholders from sectors including health, nutrition, anti-poverty, education, environment, business, and agriculture. FPCs can also include members from community and grassroots organizations who recognize the important role food can play in bringing together diverse groups of stakeholders who may not otherwise work together toward common goals.

With such a wide range of stakeholders and participants, one of the defining characteristics of FPCs is the creation of strong partnerships and collaborations between citizens, community agencies, non-governmental organizations, businesses, and government officials that, together, give voice to food system concerns and goals and create joint strategies to address them.



Food policy councils in the United States and Canada

The first FPC began about 30 years ago in the city of Knoxville, Tennessee. According to the Community Food Security Coalition, there are now approximately 100 FPCs across the USA. In Canada, the numbers are also growing. The first FPC in Canada was established in Toronto in 1991. Since then, numerous FPCs have been created in cities and regions across Canada. Many food policy councils and coalitions have also been struck at the provincial and national levels.

Box 1: Local and regional food policy councils, coalitions, and networks in Canada

[Vancouver Food Policy Council](#)

[Kamloops Food Policy Council](#)

Quesnel Food Policy Council

[North Thompson Valley Food Coalition](#)

South Okanagan & Similkameen Food Coalition

[Kaslo Food Security Project](#)

[Shushwap Food Action](#)

[Calgary Food Policy Council](#)

[Just Food Edmonton](#)

[Grande Prairie Food Security Network](#) (website under construction)

[Saskatoon Food Coalition](#)

Prince Albert Food Coalition

[Winnipeg Food Policy Council](#)

[Toronto Food Policy Council](#)

[Toronto Youth Food Policy Council](#)

[Just Food Ottawa](#)

[Waterloo Region Food Systems Roundtable](#)

Rainy River Valley Food Policy Council

[Sudbury Food Connections Network](#)

[Guelph Wellington Food Round Table Policy working group](#)

[Halton Food Council](#)

[Haliburton Highlands Local Food Coalition](#)

[Thunder Bay Food Action Network](#)

[Food Security Research Network](#)

People's Food Policy Project, 2009.

Structure and governance of food policy councils

There is no single structure or model of governance for FPCs. Some food policy councils are embedded within governments, while others operate independently of government as non-profit, grassroots organizations. Still others have a hybrid status as entities accountable to both government and community organizations.

Whatever the model, it is important to note that the **location** of a food policy council greatly impacts the types of activities it engages in. For instance, the food policy councils listed in Box 1 operate at the local or regional level, which means that they typically focus on policies and actions that are within the jurisdiction of local or regional governments. This does not mean that local food policy councils do not address food system issues that fall under a provincial or national jurisdiction. Rather, it means that a local food policy council might coordinate with a provincial or national food policy council, advocating for change at those higher levels.

Activities

Local and regional food policy councils engage in a wide range of activities of relevance to the cities and regions in which they are located. This includes public awareness campaigns, education programs, research, community food assessments, advising on policy, improving coordination between existing food policies or programs, publicizing community food resources, and hosting public forums on food system topics. Examples of specific initiatives are described in Boxes 2, 3 and 4.

Box 2: Food Secure Vancouver (Vancouver Food Policy Council)

In 2008, the Vancouver Food Policy Council (VFPC) embarked upon a two-year research project called Food Secure Vancouver. The VFPC wanted to identify, review and analyze the key factors that support and enhance Vancouver's food security. The resulting study established an integrated and ongoing review, analysis, and reporting process to monitor the status of Vancouver's food security, inform citizens and decision makers of that status, and identify priority actions for improving and

maintaining the sustainability and security of all aspects of Vancouver's food system.

Vancouver Food Policy Council, 2011.

Box 3: Community Gardening Network of Ottawa (Just Food Ottawa)

Just Food Ottawa (Ottawa's Food Policy Council) supports and liaises with the Community Gardening Network of Ottawa (CGN), an information and resource-sharing network that supports the sustainable development of community gardens within the City. The central activities of the CGN are to:

- Assist in the establishment of two or more community gardens each year, including building skills and capacity through its "How to Start a Community Garden" workshops and resources;
- Work with private and public landowners to increase access to land for community gardens in the city;
- Keep food and gardening information flowing between Just Food, the community garden coordinators, and the gardeners;
- Develop gardening skills in the city through its beginner-level gardening workshops;
- Encourage food preservation following the summer's harvest through its canning and food preservation workshops;
- Raise awareness in the city about community gardening through online newsletters and special events such as the annual Urban Agriculture Bike Tour; and
- Celebrate the season by organizing a harvest party.

Just Food, 2011.

Box 4: Kamloops Food Action Initiative (Kamloops Food Policy Council)

The Interior Health Authority, the City of Kamloops and the Kamloops Food Policy Council partnered to undertake the Community Food Action Initiative project in 2006. The goal was to engage stakeholders in efforts to strengthen and support food planning, policy, and practices in the Kamloops Region. The Community Food Action

Initiative involved the following five project elements:

1. Inventory of resources and food action projects;
2. Community consultation and policy review;
3. Food Action Forum to review policy and develop actions;
4. Draft Plan;
5. Evaluation using the Food Security Report Card tool.

BC Interior Health Authority, City of Kamloops & Kamloops Food Policy Council, 2006.

Policy implementation

As far as policy implementation is concerned, it is typically more accurate to say that food policy councils **advise** or **partner** on policy formulation and implementation. FPCs do this by spearheading research, community education campaigns, and education programs that **inform** and **enable** policy implementation. For instance, in the case of the Food Secure Vancouver initiative, research results are being used to inform the VFPC's continued input into the City of Vancouver's food policies, including the goals of Greenest City 2020, a major policy currently under development. This is not to suggest that FPCs play a lesser role in policy implementation. On the contrary, FPCs often play a central role in galvanizing citizens, raising awareness, and bringing local communities' voices into the policy process. They can also play a key role in providing governments with feedback and suggestions for improvements as new policies are being implemented. FPCs can also play an important role when citizen forums are convened to discuss and debate ideas.

Challenges faced by food policy councils

In spite of their many successes, food policy councils face a number of challenges. These include:

- Unstable funding for operations and staffing,
- Lack of clearly defined roles and responsibilities for FPC members,
- Lack of clearly defined accountabilities,
- Balancing program and policy outcomes,
- Pressure to achieve "quick, visible wins,"

- Adapting to changing political environments,
- Navigating organizational structures of local governments, and
- Jurisdictional challenges.

Strengths and opportunities

The very nature and structure of food policy councils present a number of natural strengths and opportunities. Because of their inherently multi-faceted nature, food system issues can help link a number of public policy and development goals, including environmental sustainability, food security, public health, social inclusion, and economic development. This coordinating function is seen as one of the key strengths of a food policy council. Other strengths and opportunities include FPCs' ability to:

- Bring together diverse stakeholders around common goals;
- Affect local and regional food policies and advocate for changes to provincial, national, and even international food policies; and
- Raise broad public awareness of food system issues.

Impact of food policy councils on public health practice

The connections between FPCs and public health issues are notable. It is no coincidence that many FPCs adopt the language of “healthy, just and sustainable food systems” in their vision statements and goals. Furthermore, the notion of “food security” typically underpins the work of FPCs. Food security, as defined by the United Nations, is said to exist when “all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 1996).

The impact of FPCs on public health practice can be seen in FPC programs and activities that emphasize the importance of healthy communities, improved nutrition, equitable food access, community development, and environmental health. FPC membership also ensures strong links to public health practice, with public health professionals commonly being represented at the table.

Both of these factors enable strong collaborations and partnerships with public health authorities and organizations. For instance, the Toronto Food Policy Council operates administratively under the auspices of Toronto Public Health, and came into being after the City of Toronto signed on to the United Nations Healthy Cities movement in 1991. Another example can be found in the Kamloops Food Policy Council, which partnered with the City of Kamloops and the BC Interior Health Authority to produce the Kamloops Food Action Initiative (Box 4).

Concluding remarks

FPCs are coalitions that share a common interest in improving local food systems. Through their diverse representation, partnerships with decision makers, and keen attention to the public health impacts of how food is produced, processed, distributed, consumed, and disposed-of, FPCs will continue to play an important leadership role in improving the health and sustainability of our food systems.

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