Enabling Sustainability Policy and Planning at the Local Level: The Example of Food Policy

Briefing Note

For up-to-date knowledge relating to healthy public policy

Introduction

Sustainability policies can be understood as decisions that encompass social, cultural, economic and environmental issues. Sustainability planning, as an expression of sustainability policies, refers to planning that seeks to maintain balance between environmental, economic, cultural, and social equity goals. Due to the inherent complexity of such a multi-dimensional approach, responsibility is often shared among levels of government, health authorities, not-for-profit organizations and community stakeholders. The challenge often becomes one of coordinating resources and roles for implementation.

While sustainability policies and planning have relevance at multiple scales from the neighbourhood, to city-level, regional, national and beyond, this briefing note is intended to help public health, government and non-governmental actors promote sustainability at the local level, whether in urban or rural settings.

To focus the discussion even further, and provide a concrete illustration, we will focus on one specific type of sustainability policy: food policy. Food policies refer to decisions that affect the ways that people produce, obtain, consume and dispose of their food in local communities. Food policies influence opportunities to grow food in community gardens, 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. In this sense, food policies are widely understood as sustainability issues with social, cultural, economic and environmental dimensions.

This briefing note begins by presenting traditional and emerging responsibilities of local governments. It then briefly summarizes approaches to putting sustainability priorities into action (in general). Next, the specific example of food policy is discussed by presenting four factors that may facilitate the implementation of food

policies, and by extension, other sustainability priorities.

Responsibilities of local government in Canada

While not all actors and tools involved with local sustainability are found within local governments, it is often within, or in partnership with local governments that this type of planning takes place. For this reason, it is helpful to understand both "traditional" and emerging responsibilities found at this level of government. Local governments in Canada – whether large or small – typically hold responsibilities including:

- **Planning and development:** (e.g., land use regulation and zoning),

- **Transportation planning:** (e.g., public transit and municipal roadway construction and maintenance),

- **Emergency services:** (e.g., local policing and firefighting),

- **Public utilities:** (e.g., sewage systems, waste management, water treatment, and electric utilities),

- **Parks and recreation:** (e.g., management of parks and green spaces and public recreation facilities),

- **Community services:** (e.g., libraries and community centres),

- **Economic development:** (e.g., land use decisions about the location of industrial areas and the movement of goods in and out of cities).

In recent decades, a host of additional issues have found their way onto local governments' agendas. These can include:

- Healthy communities (e.g., "walkable" neighbourhoods),
- Biodiversity and habitat protection,
- Ecological protection and restoration,
- Climate change mitigation and adaptation,

- Social inclusion and community capacity building,
- Community economic development,
- Food security and sustainable food systems.

Although not found in all local governments, these issues share a number of characteristics: They reflect new – and often complex – understandings of areas of action for local authorities and their partners.[1] They are typically multi-dimensional and involve shared responsibility among jurisdictions. They can require considerable coordination among numerous governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. And they are generally understood as policy and planning issues that promote sustainable development.

Putting new sustainability priorities into action

Given the complexity of sustainability planning issues, it is not surprising that implementation of these emerging priorities presents a number of challenges. Sustainability policies are complex and interconnected, thus requiring, among other things, the cooperation of different actors and sectors, particularly considering that emerging priorities are often cross-sectoral and sometimes lacking a clear jurisdictional "home." As geographers Lake and Hanson (2000) observe: "the greatest barrier to sustainability lies in the absence of institutional designs for implementing sustainable practices in local contexts" (p. 2).

Analyzing and understanding barriers is important, but equally important is understanding the factors and mechanisms that *enable* the implementation of policy responses to emerging issues. Over the past decade, researchers and practitioners have attempted to gain a better understanding of factors that support the implementation of sustainability policies. Particular attention has been paid to understanding the specific processes through which various actors and institutions (governmental and

non-governmental) assume new roles in local governance, planning and policy (Elwood, 2004). A related area of interest is "local partnership" approaches to sustainability planning at the local level. This is described as the creation of collaborative relationships between government, local institutions and community organizations to address cross-cutting problems (Elwood, 2002; Larner and Craig, 2002; Craig, 2004; Larner, 2004a; 2004b; Geddes, 2006). Another area of focus is that of organizational capacity building to implement policies in unfamiliar areas. This refers to the extent of staff knowledge and expertise, as well as the availability of appropriate regulatory and planning supports.

Common to all of these issues is an interest in determining the tools and resources available to facilitate the implementation of new policies. There is no right or wrong answer to the question of how to implement sustainability policies. Instead, it is possible to identify factors that research and practice have shown to contribute to success. After all, sustainability policies are dynamic and evolve over time, and effective implementation will look different depending on each case.

Four factors that can enable sustainability policies and planning

Drawing from research and practice, it is possible to distil four factors that may influence the ability of local governments to implement sustainability policies and put sustainability planning into practice (Mendes, 2008). The factors are:

1) Legal status and mandate of a new sustainability policy,
2) Staffing support and location of a new policy area within a local government bureaucracy,
3) Integration into existing policies and regulations,
4) Meaningful partnerships and citizen participation mechanisms.

The remainder of this briefing note will use the example of food policy to illustrate how these factors can impact the ability of local governments to successfully implement policies in this emerging area, and by extension, in other areas concerning sustainability as well.

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[1] It may be more accurate to state that these issues constitute a return of certain issues to urban agendas, rather than an arrival, given that so many 'emerging' urban concerns, including food security, health and sanitation, management of diversity, and civic engagement, are in fact ancient priorities of city building and administration that became badly — but not irrevocably — divorced from processes of late twentieth century urbanization. What may be 'new' is the extent to which the interconnections between issues are being emphasized in response to the unprecedented scale and scope of challenges.

Case example: Food policy

LEGAL STATUS AND MANDATE OF FOOD POLICY

From an organizational perspective, official food policy mandates often serve as an important foundation upon which new policies are built and further policy formulation is justified. Without an official mandate or legal status, the resources and authorization to advance food policy can be limited. These mandates are normally issued by a sitting Mayor and Council of a local government, but can also be put forward in the form of official agreements with partner institutions.

Box 1: Example of enabling mandates in Toronto

The City of Toronto was one of the first world cities to sign onto the United Nations' Healthy Cities movement. This mandate paved the way for the creation of the Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) in 1991, which in turn has led to considerable food policy advances in Toronto.

Box 2: Example of enabling mandates in Vancouver

In 2003, the City of Vancouver created an official mandate for food policy by calling for the creation of a "just and sustainable food system." This mandate enabled the creation of the City's first Food Action Plan (Action Plan for Creating a Just and Sustainable Food System - 2003)[2] and the City of Vancouver Food Charter (2007)[3] among other food policies. The mandate is currently being used as a foundation for a comprehensive Municipal Food Strategy that is under development.

Of course a mandate alone will not guarantee implementation. However, it often serves as an important rationale to garner further resources that might include staff time or financial resources.

STAFFING SUPPORT AND LOCATION OF FOOD POLICY WITHIN A LOCAL GOVERNMENT BUREAUCRACY

Few local governments in Canada – big or small – have staff positions entirely dedicated to food policy. However, some do exist. A notable example is the

City of Toronto where a Coordinator position for the Toronto Food Policy Council (located within Toronto Public Health) has existed for many years. In other cities, such as Vancouver, staff positions with varying degrees of focus on food policy have existed since 2004.

Research and best practices show that staff support is an important contributing factor to the success of food policy implementation (Borron, 2003; Dahlberg, 1994, 1992; Toronto Food Policy Council, 2002). The benefits of food policy staff include consistent leadership, organizational stability, keeping food system goals on the radar of local government departments, and avoiding lapses in activity (Borron, 2003; Toronto Food Policy Council, 2002). Responsibilities of food policy staff include liaising with internal and external partners, promoting consensus, developing policy, managing implementation, finding champions, and facilitating pilot programs (Ibid.).

At the same time, the existence of staff positions that focus entirely on food policy is not a necessary prerequisite for successful implementation. This is a critical point, particularly for smaller municipalities or towns where resources may be limited. From a staffing perspective, it may be equally effective to integrate responsibility for food system issues into the mandates of existing positions in a way that garners multiple benefits. For instance, responsibility for community gardens may be incorporated into the portfolio of an environmental or community planner as a way to green a local community, improve biodiversity and create vibrant community gathering spaces. Another strategy may be to enter into partnership with an organization or community group with a complementary mandate. In this way, it is not necessarily preferable to have staffing positions with an exclusive focus on any one sustainability issue, including food.

The "location" of food policy within a local government bureaucracy is an important factor to consider because it may impact the support available for implementation, and types of food policy issues addressed. For instance, the City of Toronto's food policy mandate is located within Toronto Public Health which has in part shaped its focus on "[ensuring] access to healthy, affordable, sufficient and culturally acceptable food" (City of Toronto, 2012). However, this does not preclude involvement of other departments and areas of focus. In fact, to

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[2] Vancouver City Council, 2003: http://former.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/socialplanning/initiatives/foodpolicy/systems/just.htm.

[3] City of Vancouver, 2007b: http://vancouver.ca/people-programs/vancouver-food-charter.aspx.

ensure that the multi-faceted nature of food policy issues has relevance across an organization, it may be preferable to take a more integrated approach.

One staffing and organizational mechanism to achieve this kind of integration is through an interdepartmental steering committee or technical team on food system issues. For example, the City of Vancouver's Food Systems Steering Committee is an interdepartmental staff team that meets monthly to discuss and problem-solve on food policies and programs ranging from community gardens and farmers' markets, to local food procurement and food waste pick up programs. This approach reflects the reality of food policy (and other sustainability issues) that typically require input and participation from multiple departments.

INTEGRATION OF FOOD POLICY INTO EXISTING POLICIES AND REGULATIONS

Like the multi-faceted approach to incorporating food system issues into existing staff portfolios, the integration of food policy into complementary policies and regulations often yields numerous benefits beyond any one issue alone. This is key for sustainability, where multi-functional planning with multiple outcomes is a central tenet. This approach can be a challenge due to the complex and interdepartmental nature of food policy. Specifically, food policy touches on regulatory issues that span the environment, social development, public health, anti-poverty, community building and local economic development, among others. Food policy integration can also pose challenges due to disagreements over what constitutes a responsibility of local government and what does not. In spite of the challenges, food policy has emerged as a policy innovator for proposing a range of integrative policy tools that not only bring together a range of sustainability issues, but also involve non-governmental stakeholders in their formulation and implementation.

Municipal food charters are a good illustration of this trend. Food Charters are policy statements that embody a vision for developing a just and sustainable food system. Food Charters often include vision statements, principles, and broad action goals. They are typically created collaboratively by local governments, citizen groups, food policy councils or other agencies.

Box 3: Canadian Municipalities with Food Charters

Ontario: Toronto and Sudbury

Saskatchewan: Saskatoon and Prince Albert

British Columbia: Kamloops, North Cowichan, Merritt, Kaslo and Vancouver

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Another example of integration of food policy into regulatory and legal frameworks of a local government can be found in the creation of Municipal Food Strategies or Food Security Plans. These are comprehensive policy statements (like a municipal transportation or housing plan) that bring together a number of food policy goals under one policy umbrella, while at the same time linking them to broader sustainability and community health goals.

Box 4: Toronto's Food Strategy

On June 1, 2010, Toronto's Food Strategy Report, *Cultivating Food Connections: Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Food System for Toronto*,[4] was submitted to Toronto Board of Health. The report outlines priority areas through which Toronto can achieve its environmental, economic, social and community priorities, while improving health. The report highlights numerous positive changes that are already underway and proposes several next steps for city leadership.

Additional examples of local plans or policy frameworks into which food system issues can be integrated include:

Box 5: Examples of policies or plans related to the food system

Type of policy or plan	Example
Sustainability Plans and Health Plans	**City of Vancouver's Greenest City 2020 Action Plan (GCAP) Goal 10 "Local Food"** (City of Vancouver, 2012). https://vancouver.ca/green-vancouver/a-bright-green-future.aspx **British Columbia's Community Food Action Initiative (CFAI)** (BC Provincial Health Services Authority, 2012). http://www.phsa.ca/HealthProfessionals/Population-Public-Health/Food-Security/default.htm.

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[4] Toronto Public Health, 2010: http://wx.toronto.ca/inter/health/food.nsf.

Official Community Plans (OCP) and Rezonings	City of Victoria's Official Community Plan (OCP) Section 17 "Food Systems" (City of Victoria, 2012). http://www.shapeyourfuturevictoria.ca/ City of Vancouver's Urban Agriculture Design Guidelines for the Private Realm (City of Vancouver, 2008). http://vancouver.ca/people-programs/urban-agriculture-guidelines.aspx
Neighbourhood Plans	City of Vancouver's Urban Agriculture Plan for Southeast False Creek (City of Vancouver, 2007a). http://former.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/southeast/documents/pdf/designingUA.pdf

MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIPS AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION MECHANISMS

A critical indicator of successful implementation of cross-cutting sustainability issues such as food policy is the extent to which they succeed in fostering partnerships with other governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. This factor is important because it reflects the inherently participatory nature of the food policy, and the importance of taking community (and sometimes, intergovernmental) stewardship of food policies and food policy implementation.

For instance, 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 of the project 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) an inventory of resources and food action projects; (2) Community consultation and policy review; (3) a Food Action Forum to review policy and develop actions; (4) a draft plan; and (5) an evaluation using the Food Security Report Card tool.

Also, the breadth and depth of citizen participation mechanisms in food policy creation and implementation is seen to be central to success. One of the most common examples of citizen participation mechanisms where food policy is concerned are

food policy councils (FPCs). FPCs are voluntary bodies made up of stakeholders from across the food system. Typically, the mandate of an FPC is to examine how a food system operates and provide ideas, actions and policy recommendations on how to improve it. 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 scales in Canada.[5]

Another example can be found in Vancouver's Neighbourhood Food Networks (NFNs). NFNs are an innovative model of neighbourhood-based community organizing around food system issues. NFNs are coalitions of citizens, organizations and agencies who work collaboratively in and across Vancouver neighbourhoods to address food security and food system issues. NFNs have proven to be powerful catalysts for community development and capacity building, while at the same time improving access to healthy, affordable and nutritious food for all. NFNs work in close collaboration with Vancouver's local government, provincial health authority, community centres, neighbourhood houses and numerous other partners to identify and implement food system solutions in their respective neighbourhoods.

A third example of citizen participation mechanisms that can enable food policy implementation are public forums and conferences that are organized to gather feedback on food policy issues and engage citizens in education and awareness-raising exercises. An example is the conference called, "Hammering Out a Food Policy for Hamilton: Preparing the Ground," hosted by the City of Hamilton, Ontario in February 2011. The purpose of the conference was to explore issues of food security and the role that citizens of Hamilton can play in developing city-wide food policy. The main topics discussed were Farming and Food Production, Marketing and Education, Food Distribution Systems and Access to Food.

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[5]   A briefing note on Food Policy Councils can be found at: http://www.ncchpp.ca/148/publications.ccnpps?id_article=664.

Lastly, community engagement toolkits can be important resources that provide springboards for community engagement on food system issues. A good example is the Community Food Animator Toolkit (Bett & Fodor, 2012) designed to provide individuals and organizations with the tools to engage their neighbours, families, friends, co-workers, and other networks and communities in discussions about food. The toolkit was originally designed as part of the community engagement process for the Vancouver Food Strategy, but continues to be used as a way to catalyze conversations within communities, and between residents and the city, about food system issues. The toolkit can be found at: http://former.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/socialplanning/initiatives/foodpolicy/pdf/FoodAnimationToolkit.pdf.

Concluding remarks

As governments, health authorities, not-for-profit organizations and community stakeholders continue to grapple with complex sustainability issues, it will become increasingly important to be familiar with effective strategies for policy implementation. While the "ingredients" for successful implementation will differ from place to place, we can look to examples of enabling factors to learn from. This paper presented four of these:

1) Legal status and mandate of a new sustainability policy,
2) Staffing support and location of a new policy area within a local government bureaucracy,
3) Integration into existing policies and regulations,
4) Meaningful partnerships and citizen participation mechanisms.

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