

Food Policy Councils: Governance, Success, Challenges

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Relationship with government and what this means? - policy discussion

Food policy councils: measuring success and challenges faced - policy discussion

Introduction

Food Secure Canada (n.d.) defines a food policy council (FPC) as “a group of stakeholders from across the food system that meets to discuss and act on food issues.” FPCs have appeared across North America since the 1980’s. Many academics and practitioners observe that FPCs have emerged in response to the environmental, health, and social impacts resulting from the dominant agri-food system. Pothukuchi and Kaufman (1999, p.193) define the food system as “the chain of activities connecting food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management, as well as all the associated regulatory institutions and activities”. Since every food system consists of five main sectors: production, processing, consumption, distribution, and waste recycling, a FPC should ideally consist of representatives of each of these sectors to maximize its influence on the food system (Harper et. al, 2009). FPCs create a space for dialogue and strategizing to work on improving the food system between members across different sectors of the food systems.

Food policy councils have been set up for different purposes. Mooney *et al.*, (2014) believe that they were mainly set up in order to ‘democratize food’. However, according to Halliday & Hawkes (2017) in their analysis of 22 municipal food policies and strategies, they found that each FPC has its own distinct and specific purpose. While FPCs share common goals, the governance and operation methods of each FPC are usually unique. There is no correct way to organize a FPC as different models have proven to have different advantages and disadvantages. Councils vary in their membership and governance models, priorities, and programming. These differences are usually dictated by sources of funding or lack thereof and geographic limitations. While there are some

national FPCs such as the Australia Food and Grocery council and Brazil's National Council for Food and Nutrition Security, most FPCs are either municipal or regional.

This paper mostly focuses on Municipal and Regional FPCs in Ontario, Canada and how different FPCs in the province govern themselves, operate, and evaluate their work. First, the paper examines the various governance models currently in existence in Ontario and how these models have been effective given the unique circumstances of each FPC. This section includes brief insights from interviews with members of some FPCs in Ontario. Interviews were conducted with members of five Food Policy Councils across Ontario using the interview tool found in Appendix 1. Selected interview data from two Food Policy Councils that was collected during the research stage of one of the author's thesis is also included in this paper. Second, the paper discusses various methods of defining success using a Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA). Finally, the paper examines how various FPCs across the province have measured success and how these organizations have overcome challenges related to achieving their desired outcomes. This paper is written in support of two sessions on municipal food policy councils at the 2017 Bring Food Home Conference.

Session 1: Food Policy Council Governance Models

At the time of writing, there have been a number of instrumental papers providing a systematic overview of the role and differences between FPCs (Harper et. al, 2007) (Fox, 2013) (Dahlberg, K, 1994) and one focusing on Canadian municipalities (MacRae, R., & Donahue, K., 2013). Schiff (2008) observes that the aim of the earliest FPCs was to form close relationships with local governments, citing Knoxville, Toronto, and Hartford as examples of these. Over time, and as more FPCs were created, they often came in the form of grassroots or non-governmental organizations. It has been argued that FPCs with closer ties to government will be in a good position to make policy recommendations (Harper *et al.* 2009) and receive more support (Borron 2003). In contrast to these findings, Schiff (2008) notes "formal association with government may restrict the ability of these organizations to propose changes to government structures and policy" (p. 216). While

some have found that being located in a government department ensures stability and a “relatively secure institutional foundation, including dedicated resources” (Mah *et al.*, 2013), others note that it is more important to have a liaison staff and the organizational linkages they offer than is the “actual organizational location of the council in terms of closeness or distance to the mayor/council” (Dahlberg 1994, p. 8).

While “FPCs formed by non-profits have the advantage that they may have better access to foundation funding” (Harper *et al.*, 2009, p. 29), grassroots initiatives may be the least likely to have consistent funding (Harper *et al.*, 2009). On the other hand, Winne (2002) cited in Borrón (2003) notes how closer association with government makes it more likely a FPC will receive funding, staff, and in-kind resources. Schiff’s (2007) research also finds that government support “generally relates to effectiveness in terms of the financial support, resources, and stability enjoyed by the [FPC]” (p.360). One tactic that has proven useful for FPCs is having formally designated staff support from government departments or agencies that act as liaisons. Dahlberg (1994) identifies that having a dedicated staff support from a governmental department “seems to be much more effective than simply having them serve as regular members of the FPC” (p. 4).

For the purpose of this paper, we use the categories outlined in MacRae & Donahue’s (2013) study of sixty-four local and regional Canadian municipalities working to improve the food system. MacRae & Donahue (2013) outline six different models of food policy council governance in Canada, putting them into the following categories:

Category 1: Municipality-driven food policy initiatives.

Category 2: Hybrid model with direct links to government.

Category 3: Hybrid model with indirect links to government.

Category 4: Food policy organization linked to government through a secondary agency.

Category 5: Civil society organization with limited government funding and participation.

Category 6: Civil society organization with no direct government involvement.

Through their research, MacRae & Donahue (2013) found Categories 1 & 2 to be the least common. That is likely the case as councils that fall into these categories use the most resources, which are often difficult to attain. The rest of the categories were relatively equal in numbers. These categories are largely dependent on the membership of the council, its funding level and the link it has to government.

Keys to Success

Regardless of the category and governance model, MacRae & Donahue (2013) say that one of the keys to success is having “a food policy organization whose staff and members have extensive knowledge of and expertise in food systems, a sophisticated approach to food system change, with funding that is stable and sufficient for at least a lean organizational effort.” (p.26). They also outline the importance of national and provincial networks to share information and best practices and build capacity for food policy work. In Ontario, there has been some progress in building a provincial network centered around food policy. Sustain Ontario has historically held together the provincial network in the form of the Municipal Food Policy network which consists of 44 members in the form of both individual food experts and ‘champions’, municipal institutions, food policy councils, and other organizations that do work related to municipal or regional food policy.

Since no formal, standard, and conclusive evaluation approaches have taken place on the effectiveness and perceived success of food policy councils, there is no way to identify what model is most effective as that largely depends on both the organizational goals of each council and its perception of success. MacRae & Donahue (2013) also point out the need for FPCs to document and evaluate their work. Their final recommendation is that FPCs should make the linkages between food policy and public health among other policy domains clear to policy makers to increase the chances of buy-in.

Schiff (2007) says that although FPCs may emulate each other in terms of structure or model, they might not necessarily operate in the same manner as “councils need to reflect and focus upon the needs of the communities in which they operate” p. 102). Moreover, the local conditions may also affect the ability of FPCs to perform successfully.

In the Waterloo Region for instance, “the local and historical contexts were critical factors defining regional government’s participation in food system planning activity” (Wegener et al., 2012, p. 4107). When evaluating and analysing the role of FPCs in contributing to agri-food governance, it is essential to recognize both the unique models as well as the contexts within which they are created.

Interview Findings

Due to temporal limitations, only five interviews were conducted as part of this project. This is by no means an ample or conclusive sample size, however these interviews were conducted in an attempt to have a more in-depth conversation with FPCs on how they govern themselves among other matters relating to governance such as evaluation, which is discussed further in this paper. Interviewees were first asked to place themselves in one of the six categories outlined by MacRae and Donahue (2013). Three out of five of the councils interviewed identified that they were a civil society organization with links to government while the other two identified more with the hybrid models. Prior to settling on one of the categories, almost all of the interviewees mentioned that they don’t necessarily see themselves falling into any of these categories six categories. This speaks to the diversity FPCs in Ontario are in terms of governance models. It also solidifies the point that all FPCs operate differently and therefore, we cannot look for one-size fits all solutions or recommendations.

Civil Society Governance Model.

The three interviewees in this category generally had similar governance models. They all had either government officials or city staff sit on the council that provided some in-kind support. They all felt that the presence of city representatives was helpful as they were able to update the FPC on the discussions had by city council. It also gave them insights and hints on what council is more likely to listen and pay attention to. Two interviewees mentioned that these councillors joined their respective FPCs for political reasons. Thus, finding ‘food champions’ in the form of city councilors is important for FPCs

who wish to have government representation on their council. The government representatives act as allies and a link between the city and the FPC, both in a formal and informal manner which could lead to the FPC acquiring more resources but also more legitimacy and political capital. The three interviewees also identified that not having to formally deal with government bureaucracy made projects move faster as they didn't need to seek approval from others. All FPCs in this category identified the lack of funding as an issue and a limitation to them fulfilling their organizational goals. However, since they receive no municipal funding there is a lot of freedom for the FPC to pursue whatever project they like. It also gives them freedom to apply for funding from any community partners or funding bodies without restriction.

While there are positives and negatives to this model, everyone mentioned that they could use more funding. Whether they would prefer that funding to come from the municipality or other sources remains unclear. One FPC which doesn't have any official representation from government mentioned that lack of official representation is an issue and limitation because FPC members have to spend time fostering relationships with elected officials or staff. It is also harder to get institutional buy-in on policy recommendations, for example. Because there are no formal links, city council are under no obligation to pursue or listen to recommendations that a FPC might have.

Hybrid Governance Model.

The two interviewees in this category had indirect funding from the municipal body through allocated time from city staff and official representation from municipal committee members. Similar to their counterparts, they believed that their indirect link with the municipality is an advantage as they are still free to govern and organize themselves however they want. Within a two-year period both FPCs in this category have had their priorities change in one way or another which possibly could have been made more difficult should they be fully funded by a municipal body.

One membership and governance model that stood out was that of The Greater Sudbury Food Policy Council. The council has merged the two by having 'resource

members' and 'council members'. "Resource members" are those whose professional work and occupation is related to the work of the council. Those members are often city or regional staff who use their staff time to feed into the work of the FPC. Volunteer members consist of anyone in the community who has time to volunteer to the council.

Another finding that stood out was a revelation by an interviewee who mentioned that the FPC isn't efficient at all. This former FPC chose to rebrand, and detach themselves from the FPC model and merely operate as a volunteer-run non-profit organization doing food advocacy work. The interviewee identified that the group is split into separate working groups. Each working group had a certain issue they were working on and the working group was free to organize themselves as they please, which proved to be more effective, according to the interviewee. It's worth noting that this group has more limited government involvement than the other FPC in this category.

Session 2: Measuring Success and Addressing Challenges.

Defining Success

The main theory and method of defining success proposed in this paper is the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA). A livelihood comprises the capacities, assets (material and social) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining natural resource base (Scoones 1998, p. 5). The approach came about from several decades of changing perspectives on poverty, how poor people construct their lives, and the importance of structural and institutional issues (Ashley & Carney, 1999). SLA is a set of principles guiding development interventions which have to be evidence-based rather than instigated in a top-down fashion (Morse & McNamara, 2013). SLA requires an analysis of economic, social and political relationships that influence poverty and wealth, and addresses relationships between intrahousehold, household, regional, and macro economies, and between households and institutions and

organizations (Bebbington, 1999, p. 2028-2029). Through these indicators, researchers who use SLA consider causes of poverty, access to resources, diverse livelihood activities.

SLA is also a development objective, that being an improvement of livelihoods through making capital less vulnerable or by enhancing the contributions that some capital can make (Farrington, 2001). Case studies find that it is not objective risk that matters, but people's subjective assessments of things that make them vulnerable (Adato et al. 2007). Capital in the context of livelihoods includes not only financial capital, but also human and social capital among others to be mentioned shortly. Capital doesn't only refer to private property; it can be a common good such as land and water (De Haan, 2001).

The most important resources needed for a sustainable livelihood according to Blaikie et al. (1994), Chambers and Conway (1992), Chambers (1995) and Carney (1999) are:

1. Human capital in labour but also skills, experience, knowledge and creativity.
2. Natural capital such as land, water, forests, pasture, and minerals.
3. Physical capital such as food stocks, including livestock, equipment, tools and machinery.
4. Financial capital, which is any economic resource that can be equated with monetary value.
5. Social capital specifically, the quality and strength of relations between people in a community.
6. Political capital that includes citizenship, membership in political parties, and informal political bases – which help in obtaining or maintaining rights over other Assets.

While this theory can offer some standing ground for defining success in the context of evaluating food system interventions, a systems approach is an essential complementary framework. That is because in a food system, interventions that may appear to be enhancing specific areas in the food system, can be damaging to another area. Ingram (2011) outlines that a food systems approach needs to assess the effects on

each sector of the food cycle, including but not limited to: food production, processing and packaging, retailing and distributing, and consumption. All of these processes have potential to affect the six modes of capital mentioned above that are needed for a sustainable livelihood.

Evaluating Success and Learning from Failure

After World War II, evaluation has emerged as a response to heightened public concern about distribution and management of public funds (Suchman, 1968). Public program managers have thus adopted evaluation to ease that concern (Franklin & Thrasher, 1976). Evaluation needs to be constantly innovative and integrative to accommodate for the practical realities of ongoing programs and contemporary needs, especially for social interventions in the food system.

In an increasingly neoliberal age, funding and resources for work on enhancing food security rates, or for supporting local farmers and other food producers, are often dependent on results from evaluations. For that reason, among others, FPCs ought to strive to document and evaluate their work. One of the biggest benefits of FPCs formally evaluating their work is for writing funding applications. If FPCs are seeking funding and are applying for a grant, being able to outline and point to previous successes will greatly benefit the FPC or group. Another benefit is that, as part of a network of food organizations, FPCs can share what works and what doesn't with their peers across their respective networks. This can increase cohesion between FPCs and the overall strength of a network which is essential for strengthening the food movement in Canada as Levkoe (2014) points out.

In documenting and evaluating their work, FPCs can have a chance to systematically review their goals and programming to identify if they are aligned with each other and adjust them if necessary. Another reason institutionalizing evaluation can be helpful to FPCs is that the work that often goes unrecognized can be documented. This can help members feel more of a sense of accomplishment, which can strengthen their ties to the council. Finally, since membership of some FPCs is constantly changing, it is important

to document all the work that is done to retain institutional memory for future members of the council. El Sawy et al. (2016) argue that an organization's history can often be used as an organizational resource. It is especially important when applying for grants to be able to showcase the work that a council has done.

As the reasons for evaluating FPCs are plenty, there are also several methodologies which FPCs can use to evaluate their work. Dahlberg (1994) outlines four ways in which to define 'success' or 'failure' with respect to FPCs: (1) in terms of their own goals; (2) in terms of the nature and scope of proposals adopted in their local context; (3) in terms of their contribution to educating political leaders, government officials and the public on food system issues; and (4) in terms of larger and longer-term goals relating to sustainability (p. 2). Harper *et al.* (2009) identify the importance of the need for FPCs to put in place "a specific strategic plan, evaluation model, decision making model, and a strong understanding of the local food system" in order to function well (p. 6). Typically, social programs are qualitative in nature, however evaluating such programs is usually met with quantitative data. Historically, program managers and funders have quantitative dreams to qualitative goals and evaluators have responded to that by qualifying their methods to accommodate the aspects of programs that defy quantification (Franklin & Thrasher, 1976).

Food systems and any interventions within them are inherently complex because of the large number of actors and stakeholders involved. "Food policy development is a complex issue for policy makers because . . . it is about the intersections between a number of policy systems that are historically divided intellectually, constitutionally, and departmentally" (MacRae, 2011, p.428). Thus, an ideal mode of evaluation for FPCs would be a systems model. A systems model considers everything in relation to the program, including the intended consequences but also exterior variables are brought into the evaluation frame. However, a systems approach requires more knowledge and understanding of a program's activities which is more expensive financially and effort wise. A stakeholder focused approach like Utilization Focused Evaluation, developed by Patton (1978), could be helpful, as well. Utilization Focused Evaluation focuses on the goals of the program and how do the outcomes of a program contribute to the original goal or question

posed. Adopting this system requires careful planning from the beginning of the program as the goal of the project is central to its evaluation in this model.

Evaluation typically focuses on results, however processes can also be evaluated as they can be beneficial. One easy criteria for FPCs to evaluate processes relates to the enhancement of social capital around the food system. For example, Sustain Ontario's networks, which all do work related to food, have arguably enhanced the social capital between FPCs in the region. The strength of its network has led to some important outcomes. Levkoe (2014) says "Building on the reputation and influence of its diverse membership, Sustain Ontario has positioned itself as a respected representative in the eyes of provincial authorities. Government representatives regularly contact leaders from Sustain Ontario's network to request input on food and farming related policy directions" (p.395).

Measuring social capital could be an asset to FPCs. It's also an effective way of influencing funders and policy makers as these institutions prefer to invest scarce resources in activities that can be measured and that have tangible outcomes (Walker et al. 2000). As the effect and shape of social capital is very context specific, a one size fits all measurement impact is not recommended as it can lead to misleading or loose results. Since different FPCs have different goals and their own definitions of success, it is not possible to effectively judge which system works best as it depends on local contexts. Whereas economic capital is almost always convertible, there is no guarantee that social capital can be clumped into a single quantitative currency. Two methods of measuring social capital are social network mapping and free-form storytelling. "Social network analysis assumes that relationships are important. It maps and measures formal and informal relationships to understand what facilitates or impedes the knowledge flows that bind interacting units" (Serrat, 2009, p. 2).

While we mentioned that standardized evaluation criteria could lead to loose results, there are tools that exist such as the "Get it Toolgether: Assessing Your Food Council's Ability to Do Policy Work" developed by Palmer & Calancie (2017). This tool can be helpful should a policy council want to be evaluated solely on their ability to achieve policies. The

authors note that should a group's focus expand beyond policy work, that this tool is not intended to be a comprehensive evaluation for all of the group's work.

How do Ontario's FPCs Evaluate Themselves?

In addition to asking five Ontario FPCs about membership and governance, we asked them about evaluation. The interview questions related to evaluation pertained to members' perceptions of success and how they evaluate themselves or wish to be evaluated on said success. Of the five FPCs interviewed, only one FPC identified that they formally evaluate their work. Their evaluation takes place in many different forms. They engage in a form of summative evaluation where the outcomes of the work they do are central to the evaluation process. In their strategic planning meeting, they discuss evaluation and how they can measure success. One example of that is that they measure how many times food and agriculture are mentioned in official plans by the county and municipalities. While they aren't the only actors involved in pushing for food issues to be considered in official plans, they see themselves as actors involved and therefore include these results as part of their evaluation. They also count how many people attend their public attends as a means of raising awareness. They also survey people who attend their events and workshops to see how their perceptions or skill levels have changed from year to year. Tracking volunteer and in-kind hours was also identified as an evaluation metric as that is something that is very helpful when applying for grants.

Another FPC initiated the process of evaluating its work, however most of the members indicated that this wasn't a priority. Three FPCs do not evaluate themselves formally, although there has been some informal evaluations during meetings in the form of debriefing discussions. This type of evaluation was also found in another FPC in Ontario, the Durham Food Policy Council, whereby it overhauled its operating model following reflection of the work it had done over the years. Elsewhere, outside of the province, among the sub-committees of the Edmonton Food Council, a FPC interviewed separately as part of one of the author's thesis work, is the Measurement Committee which has begun

to articulate various ways to evaluate the council's work. One way that it has done so previously is by surveying the public through an existing survey platform implemented by the City.

All FPCs were interested or wanting to do more evaluation with exception of one where membership is divided on whether they need to evaluate themselves at all. If evaluation is something a FPC is interested in, some quick common evaluation metrics which can be done collectively according to the interviewees include: measuring 1) Media mentions; 2) Mentions of the FPC during city council meetings; 3) Public event attendance; 4) Volunteer hours, in-kind hours (used to apply for grants). 5) Changes in bylaws and plans from year to year related to food.

Looking Forward

This paper has offered insight into the governing models of Ontario FPCs as well as the methods that have been used by FPCs to evaluate themselves. While it is by no means comprehensive, it provides a starting point for discussion at the Bring Food Home conference hosted by Sustain Ontario. The goal is that this paper will inspire further discussion during the conference sessions and from there that a common understanding of best practices in governing and evaluation methods of FPCs is achieved.

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Appendix 1

1a. Which one of the six categories does your food policy council fall into?

1. Municipality-driven food policy council
2. Hybrid model with direct links to government
3. Hybrid model with indirect links to government
4. Food policy organization linked to government through a secondary agency
5. Civil society organization with limited government funding and participation
6. Civil society organization with no direct government involvement

1b. What are the advantages and disadvantages of being in this category?

2. Policy work doesn't necessarily lead to changes in programs, or tangible outcomes. How do you measure your effectiveness?
3. In 2015 ,you listed these as your top 3 achievements... what would you add to that list now?
4. Would you be able to share a success story with us?
5. What would you say are your group's top 3 priorities now—what challenges are you currently working on?
6. Do you wish to have your name associated with your answers?