



Using Food Policy Councils to Address Rural Food Issues

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Introduction

Food policy councils (FPCs or FPC) are a growing trend throughout the United States and are estimated to have almost doubled between 2010 and 2013, from about 117 to 200 (Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, 2015). FPCs are comprised of key community stakeholders who work through issues surrounding food in their communities. According to Fitzgerald (2014), “Councils typically identify and discuss food-related problems, brainstorm food system solutions, foster coordination across agencies and sectors, and evaluate and influence food policies.” Food security and poverty are two of these food-related problems that food policy councils may address through “brainstorming, coordination, and evaluation.” Rural community leaders may consider the creation of a food policy council as a means for addressing the issues of food insecurity and poverty present in their communities.

Food insecurity, or the limited or uncertain ability to acquire nutritionally adequate and safe foods in socially acceptable ways, and poverty are national and local concerns that are present in many rural communities across Indiana. These issues represent a threat to the health and well-being of Indiana residents. Inadequate nutrient intake and a higher prevalence of chronic disease are some of the negative outcomes linked with food insecurity. The prevalence of household food insecurity in Indiana has steadily increased from an average of 12.3% in the years 2007-2009 to an average of 14.1% in the years 2011-2013, an estimate similar to the U.S. average of 14.3% in 2013 (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, and Singh, 2014).

Another food-related problem that FPCs may address is poverty. Poverty is related to food insecurity, yet different, because classification is based on household income. Poverty is defined as having an income below the federally determined poverty threshold. Poverty is also associated with many negative health outcomes. Similar to food insecurity, the prevalence of poverty in rural Indiana has increased in recent years—about one out of every eight rural residents lived in poverty in 2010, compared to one out of every 12 in 2000 (Carriere and Waldorf, 2013). The increasing number of households affected by food insecurity and poverty in Indiana presents a challenge for Indiana communities and may represent an even greater challenge for rural communities that have fewer resources that may be directed to improve these situations.

The Rural Indiana Issues Series

Audience: Local and state leaders who work with rural communities.

Purpose: To find data about issues of concern in rural communities and to interpret that data in meaningful ways to aid in decision-making.

Method: Review of food insecurity and poverty data presented by previous Rural Indiana Issues publications and other resources.

Potential Topics: Demographic changes, business development, health, health care, local government, taxes, education, agriculture, natural resources, leadership development, etc.

Outcome: Better, more informed decisions by rural decision-makers.

A previous Rural Indiana Issues publication by Carriere and Ayres (2013) posed questions for community leaders to consider when looking for ways to improve food security in their communities, such as, “What is the quality of the food aid available” and “How can we make aid available to those who might otherwise have limited access?” Both are questions that may be addressed by an FPC. An FPC may also aid community leaders by taking on the capacity-building role that community leaders traditionally fulfill by instilling desire and motivation in their communities to improve food security. An FPC’s goals and objectives may more successfully be achieved when the input of all stakeholders is considered and when the council facilitates and promotes ownership, motivation, and desire to influence change.

This article defines FPCs, discusses the challenges and opportunities that communities may face when starting and sustaining FPCs, and presents policy implications for rural decision makers.

Defining Food Policy Councils

FPCs may engage in a variety of activities, but influencing policy related to food in the local community, city, state, bounded area of land, or population is often a distinguishing activity; food and food systems are also central to FPC activity and structure. Representation from each component of the food system, including food production, processing and preparation, distributing, selling, consuming, and waste management, are ideal to include as vested stakeholders when discussing food issues, such as access, availability, resources, and barriers (Figure 1). Inclusivity of the community where change is directed, such as the low-income and food insecure community, may make FPCs more effective at achieving goals that will be accepted and embraced by the entire community.

Bylaws or a food charter with a mission and vision statement may be established by FPCs as a guiding structure. Organization of FPCs usually includes a steering committee, a chair, and other executive positions that are filled by elections, volunteering, appointments, or an application process. FPCs may form based on the interest of several interested groups. However, sometimes FPCs are government sanctioned on a local, county, state, or regional level.

FPCs may exist in rural or urban areas. The two currently existing non-government sanctioned FPCs in Indiana are located in urban areas; one functions at the local level and the other at the state level. However, successful rural FPCs have been established in other states with similar populations to Indiana such as Michigan and Ohio and may provide excellent models for the initiation of rural Indiana FPCs. These rural FPCs may encounter similar situations compared with rural Indiana. Urban FPCs, such as the ones mentioned above, can also provide examples of successful structures, missions, and goals that may be applied in rural Indiana communities.

Opportunities for Food Policy Councils

FPCs may be diverse in the policies, programs, or local issues they target. Examples include activities directed to improving

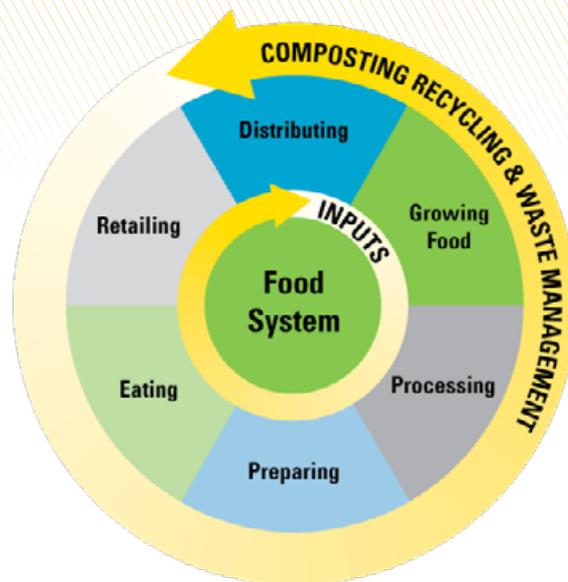


Figure 1. Food System Diagram (Colasanti, K. et al., 2010)

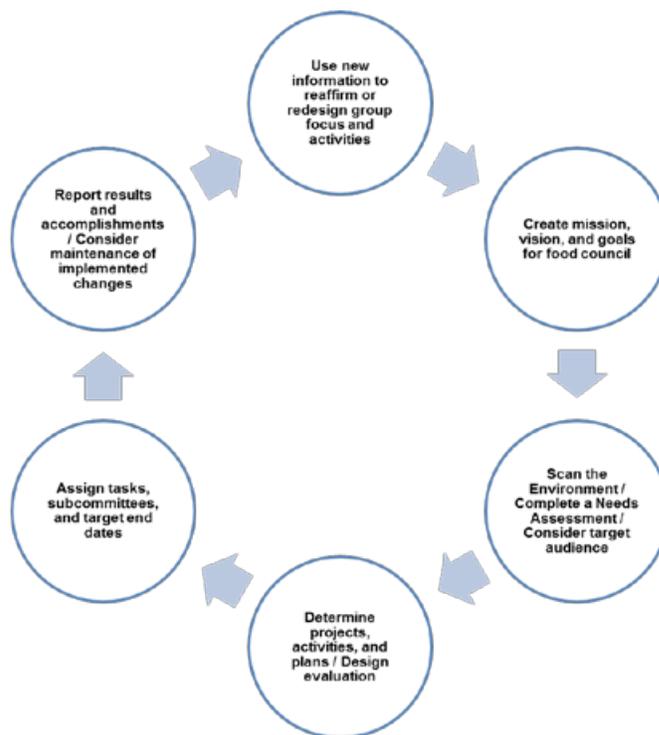


Figure 2. Sample Food Policy Council Activity

food insecurity and stimulating the local economy. Providing adequate access to food, promoting local food, and creating a sustainable community are a few ways they may take action. Other actions taken by FPCs to accomplish their goals may include providing education and advocacy to the community as well as the local and state government. FPCs often sponsor programs and public events or hold community listening sessions to engage key stakeholders. Relationships with the government may facilitate opportunities to propose policy changes or evaluate legislation. Examples of issues that FPCs may target for

change through legislation include zoning and land use, farmland preservation, community gardening, and the development of farmer markets (Harper, 2009). Being part of an FPC allows members to develop leadership skills and gain professional development. Last, the Cooperative Extension Service can have a key role in FPCs due to their network of community, university, state, and national connections and mission to provide scientific research-based information to the public.

Figure 2 shows an example of the life and activity of an FPC and the process by which programs, policy, and local food issues can be addressed by an FPC. FPCs can vary by location, but this diagram shows a sample overall picture of how an FPC can develop and act on their ideas. Each step can be implemented as necessary.

Possible Challenges

Initial challenges that a community may face in starting and sustaining an FPC include meeting basic internal needs. Locating a meeting space and ensuring leadership of the FPC are necessary components for functioning that are sometimes challenging. Other challenges include securing and identifying a network of stakeholders and maintaining membership. The volunteer-based nature of most FPCs can pose difficulties to completing the necessary activities for carrying out the mission and goals. Securing funding for council activities may be longer term challenges. However, this type of capacity building takes time. Many FPCs may spend their first few years learning about the local food system. Preliminary success, such as completion of community food assessments, is important for building momentum and credibility (Harper, 2009).

A strong and positive relationship with the population the council is representing or attempting to influence is also very important in order to carry out FPC initiatives. Building trust and ensuring equity among membership and community leaders may take time. For example, to affect policy, FPCs must have good-standing relationships with policy makers and need to consider ways of presenting their needs without alienating groups that have the power to help them accomplish their goals. The diversity within an FPC may contribute to difficulties in uniting to direct change or cause stagnation but can also strengthen the acceptability of FPC initiatives. Schiff (2008) notes that FPCs are uniquely positioned to be the networking agent across food system sectors and the voice for community concerns. FPCs may find success when community concerns can be balanced with FPC goals and when the council can be involved without becoming overly committed or too narrowly-focused (Harper, 2009).

Policy Implications

FPCs have recently received national attention due to several successful initiatives. For example, the Michigan Food Policy Council, formed as a result of an executive order from the governor in 2005, was charged with suggesting policies and programs to improve the state's food environment. Accomplishments of this council are many, including the following.

- Fostering entrepreneurship in the mobile produce business,
- Increasing the number of farmer markets that accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits,
- Improving access to produce, meat, and dairy in low-income areas by acting on legislation in 2008 that incentivized grocery store development and improvement in these areas, and
- Suggesting legislation to enhance the farm-to-school process in Michigan that passed into law in 2008 (CDC & DHHS, 2010).

Another example of a successful FPC initiative is The Athens Food Policy Council in Ohio. This FPC encouraged residential gardens and farms by successfully changing the city code lawn restrictions to allow front yard gardens and domestic animals to be raised within city limits. Another accomplishment included the creation of a partnership with the Athens County Health Department to improve regional food security (Athens Food Policy Council, 2010).

Because of these successes and others across the nation, federal government groups have recommended the type of environmental approach that FPCs take to improve public health programming. For example, in 2014, the USDA initiated new guidance for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education (SNAP-Ed), requiring states to implement policy, systems, and environmental approaches. FPCs are one way for SNAP-Ed to fulfill this guidance due to the multiple opportunities for community partners, programs, and policy makers to work together to engage citizens from diverse backgrounds and create council initiatives (Fitzgerald, 2014). USDA's recognition of FPCs as a possible approach to improving food security and suggestion of collaboration among various sectors of the food system in a 2012 Request for Proposals is another example of federal support of FPCs (USDA, 2012). Several USDA grants offering funds to start an FPC or that an FPC could apply for in order to help carry out their goals are listed in Table 1, page 4.

FPCs work closely with policy makers in the community. Those with experience in policy, such as rural community leaders, can be especially valuable to the food policy council by being a resource for information, serving on the FPC, or being a liaison to the group. FPCs can also benefit community leaders by helping them build capacity around food issues in their communities and serving as a liaison from the community to the community leader. Examples of questions decision-makers may want to consider when developing a plan to address FPCs within their rural community include the following.

- Is our community ready for an FPC?
- How can we begin an FPC and where can we get more information?
- What are the barriers and opportunities of having an FPC in our community?
- Could an FPC help offer solutions for some of our community's biggest food issues?

Table 1. Grants for Which FPCs Can Apply

Name of Program	Website	Purpose
Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program	http://www.nifa.usda.gov/fo/communityfoodprojects.cfm	To fund community development activities in the categories of 1) community food projects, 2) planning projects, 3) training and technical assistance projects
Community Facility Grant Program, within USDA's Rural Development Department	http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/had-cf_grants.html	To fund development of essential community facilities in rural areas and towns of up to 20,000 in population
Speciality Crop Block Grant Program	http://www.in.gov/isda/2474.htm	To fund projects that increase the competitiveness of speciality crops in relation to an issue affecting the speciality crop industry (i.e., improving efficiency or reducing costs of distribution systems)
Farmers Market Promotion Program, within USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service Department	http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/fmpp	To fund projects that increase domestic consumption of, and access to, locally and regionally produced agricultural products and develop direct produce-to-consumer market opportunities that serve local markets
Local Food Promotion Program, within USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service Department	http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateA&navID=WholesaleandFarmersMarkets&leftNav=WholesaleandFarmersMarkets&page=LFPP&description=Local%20Food%20Promotion%20Program&acct=fmpp	To fund projects that expand local and regional food business enterprises to increase domestic consumption of, and access to, locally and regionally produced agricultural product. Projects must aim to develop new market opportunities for farm and ranch operations serving local markets. Planning and implementation grants available.

- What are some groups, organizations, or individuals we could reach out to in the community to participate in an FPC?
- How will we know if our FPC is successful?

Evaluating the effectiveness of an FPC can aid in making decisions about where to focus future council activities and in demonstrating the value of FPC efforts to funders and others interested in implementing similar strategies. Most important, evaluation can function to document the FPC's overall impact on food insecurity, poverty, and other outcome goals. Community food security may be monitored by using indirect measures such as estimates of food assistance participation and poverty rates or more directly by quantifying the household food security of a target group or sub-population. Resources to aid in quantifying food insecurity and to further knowledge of food systems and FPCs are listed in Table 2, page 5.

Conclusion

FPCs present opportunities for communities of all sizes and individuals in a variety of roles to facilitate change. The current federal environment is supportive of FPC development and has made resources available to aid their activity. Initiatives to provide greater access to food in rural communities are one way that FPCs can improve food security, community stability, and economic growth and development, enhancing health and well-being of residents and positively affecting the entire community.

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Table 2. Additional Resources

Resource	Website	Content
USDA Measurement of Food Security	http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/measurement.aspx#.VEAG1Pl4p4c	What is Food Security and Food Insecurity? How Are Food Security and Insecurity Measured? Survey Questions Used by USDA to Assess Household Food Security
John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Center for a Livable Future	http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-a-livable-future/index.html	Food System Resources: Research, Education, Projects, News and Events
Growing Food Connections	http://growingfoodconnections.org/	Information about food system Research, Education, and Planning and Policy

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