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Democratizing the Food System- The Food Policy Council Movement

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From the Author: Garrett Spear, Graduated May 2012, Bachelor of Arts in Sociology. This paper grew from

an independent study of the social movement of food policy councils conducted with essential guidance from Sociology faculty Patrick Mooney. This paper has informed ongoing local food system stakeholder meetings, but remains unpublished and unrepresented in a formal context. This project has served as a springboard to involve more community members and organizations in a discussion of a Food Policy Council organization for Lexington and the surrounding region, with meetings, discussion, and deliberation continuing today. Garrett also enjoys playing music, reading, and printmaking.



Faculty Mentor, Dr. Patrick Mooney: This paper by Garrett Spear, “*Democratizing the Food System:*

The Food Policy Council Movement” derives from Garrett’s work in an independent studies course (SOC 395) with me in the Spring of 2012, his senior year. Garrett read the current literature on the food policy council movement and joined my discussions on this matter with Professor Keiko Tanaka and my graduate research assistant Ms. Gabriele Ciciurkaite. He then took it a step further by engaging with an embryonic form of this movement in Fayette County through the participatory action research approach that he describes in this article. Garrett’s paper captures a significant national trend in which people, as (equal) citizens, rather than (unequal) consumers, are seeking greater access to governance of local and regional food systems. This, of course, has significant implications for coping with the increasing problem of food insecurity, hunger, and malnutrition in this ‘land of plenty’. Garrett has done a nice job here of applying sociological concepts, as well as a sociological method, to an important social problem and an analysis of how some people are trying to solve that problem.

Democratizing the Food System – The Food Policy Council Movement

A food-awareness movement is developing as increasing numbers of consumers become mindful of the journey food travels to reach their plate. Individuals are demanding more accountability in the way in which their food is produced, including sourcing preferences, inputs used in production, packaging and shipping, producer compensation, consumer accessibility, nutritional content, and, in general, the overall sustainability of the food supply chain. Individuals, businesses, nonprofits, and others have recognized this trend, and in response these parties have begun to form civil groups based around food issues in their community, assuming active roles in the direction of their food system. This relatively new form of autonomous political organization arises to directly address the community's food policy needs.

Sociologists are interested in the individuals and organizations involved, and how they cooperate or compete to mobilize resources to gain a public voice in defining community food policy. The social interplay of cultural trends, relevant economic forces, and individual and group lifestyles offers a dynamic landscape for sociological analysis.

Lexington, Kentucky is no exception. Many local individuals and organizations have become deeply involved with various aspects of the food system, and this network is growing with each passing year. However, Lexington is lacking an element present in the network of other regional or city food networks: a food policy council. The term 'food policy council' encompasses many diverse groups, but common factors describe locally or regionally-oriented organizations, focused on food and health issues, and composed of a varied range of members who represent their interests in collaborative projects or policy development. Many factors contribute to food policy councils (FPCs) developing in some cities and not in others. To determine why, let us first examine the history, structure, method, and purpose of the food policy council.

History

According to Food First's 2009 "Lessons Learned" publication, Knoxville, Tennessee was the birthplace of the FPC movement when the first food policy council was founded there in 1982. Since then, food policy-related organizations have become increasingly common across the United States- over 200 groups are currently listed on a movement coalition website (Food Security Coalition, 2012). The movement's development over the past few decades has been guided and influenced by myriad factors, including the failure of the conventional food system to provide for the food needs of all socio-economic classes equally or to protect the livelihoods of food-producers.

Influenced by current political and economic settings, government and NGO agencies may assert varying claims of political power, ranging on the spectrum of working together and sharing information and resources to actively opposing each other's objectives (Walker, 2009). Food policy councils bridge this gap, and are a unique mesh of individuals from across the food system, including public officials as well as private and community interests. The concept of *bridging social capital* may be defined as the benefits one gains from engaging in social networks outside one's usual social group. In the context of this study, *bridging social capital* describes how FPCs facilitate network building between members of distinct interests in order to cooperate on problems or issues shared by those communities.

In theory, the resilience of the food policy council model derives from the inclusiveness and diversity of its representation of local food system stakeholders, who establish vital connections between community needs and government planning. In actual manifestations, accurate representation of all interests coexisting in a large, diverse community is difficult to achieve completely. While it is nice to think diverse interests could be equitably represented, many social movements must confront the possibility that a single powerful group or coalition of interests might gain control of the direction of the FPC, and use that influence at the expense of the community. Fortunately, most FPCs maintain open records for transparency and accurate information reporting. Additionally, single-interest-dominated food policy organizations have proven unsuccessful over time, (Harper et al., 2009).

Research questions

Research questions that guided this paper are: Why do some food policy councils achieve success while others fail? How would one begin to measure levels of FPC success? Based on answers to the first two questions, what are some best practices for effective food policy council organizing, and which methods are appropriate for different situations? Ultimately I am interested in the possibility of a food policy council for the Lexington area, and my research is thus focused on the local context. Why doesn't Lexington currently have a FPC, when some other comparable regional cities established them years ago? There are, of course, factors at play unique to each place that may encourage or hinder FPC development. Regional-scale organizational, political, and financial infrastructures all have an influence on determining the fate of each local FPC. What then are the macro-scale variables present in the Lexington regional community that influence local food policy interests?

Research methods

To answer these questions, my research consisted of a series of interview discussions with various food system participants and a review of academic and community organization literature/media on food policy councils and related topics. As a consumer, scholar, and employee of the local food system, I engaged in *Participatory Action Research* methods to discover other community members' views on this issue. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a research methodology focused on active collaboration with community stakeholders to engage in research that both informs and is informed by the collective group experience. The research team acknowledges its participation and utilizes its embeddedness to fully inquire and analyze the situation as a social member rather than outside observer. Since I was already embedded in local food-related networks, the PAR model was an appropriate method for me to both study and become involved in the local food policy scene.

I utilized many connections, developed through my studies at UK and also my employment at Good Foods, a local cooperative grocery, to help me find appropriate individuals to speak with about food systems and policy. Some of my contacts were directly interviewed, and some introduced new individuals to me, from their own networks, resulting in data collection based upon snowball sampling principles. I had many discussions, some lengthy, some brief, and some ongoing, with food system stakeholders from as many networks as I had access to. The purpose of locally-focused

interviews was to ascertain community attitudes about a potential Lexington food policy organization.

During the course of my research, I learned that the discussion of such a project has been ongoing for a few years. Rather than randomly survey the wider community, I selectively chose to interview individuals who held key positions, institutional knowledge, and were situated in various sectors of the local food system. Individual interviews ranged from 30 minutes to hours in length, and although questions focused on the individual's perspective from their own food sector, discussions often grew to include topics from across the food system. Notes were handwritten during most interviews, and some sessions were recorded and transcribed.

Furthermore, I regularly attended meetings of various informal local food policy groups and engaged in discussion and note-taking during these sessions. Meetings were most useful in expanding my network when I met individuals for the first time. Indeed, a few of the interviews were conducted with new acquaintances. I spoke with farmers, food processors, grocers, government employees, chefs, food system researchers, business owners, non-profit volunteers and employees, and community food activists.

Prior to and during the study, I conducted background research on food policy councils to establish my understanding of the theories behind FPCs and also to frame the local scenario in context of the national movement. Findings of this literature review are discussed subsequently.

Finally, this study is intended to aid and educate Lexington community members on the aspects of FPC models most relevant to the local context. Diversity of many FPCs' organizational structure and variability in their purposes, programs, methods, and thematic focus provide a wide range of inspiration from which to draw ideas. In analyzing the region's resources and challenges, with consideration to the strengths, weaknesses, and needs of FPCs themselves, one may discover the best strategies towards forming a FPC here. In addition, locally focused research will inform a better understanding of how Lexington itself could most benefit from hosting a food policy organization collaborating between community members and food system stakeholders.

Ethical considerations

The reasons to form a food policy council in a given region may be varied, but one common claim is an interest in providing healthy food access to all community members, regardless of their social status. This ethical mandate, influenced by the ideals of ethics and justice advocates, claims a 'right to food'. The United Nations Human Rights Council states "the right to food requires the possibility either to feed oneself directly from productive land or other natural resources, or to purchase food. This implies ensuring that food is available, accessible and adequate."(De Schutter, 2010. p4) This concept is primarily useful in abstract and theoretical discussions, because food is, in reality, not a right guaranteed to all people. The quantities, types, and frequency of food availability are all privileges directly linked to one's status in society. This inequity of access is in part due, in many American communities, to agricultural products being handled as commodities in a marketplace rather than as a shared community resource to which all are entitled.

However, the ethical ideal of a right to food remains relevant, in that it continues to inform a vision for food justice advocates. While such individuals may admit that global-

scale right-to-food is unattainable, local-scale food rights (most often in the Global North) are sometimes a possibility, if embraced by a concerted community effort. Organizations that formally address the right to food issue draw from both the real-world experience of their members and also moral standards, which together direct programs to address key issues in the local community. However, food justice is a project of both organizations as well as many individuals who contribute their skills, knowledge and experiences to such projects: “Participation of food-insecure groups in the design and implementation of the policies that most affect them is also a key dimension of the right to food.”(DeSchutter, 2010. p4) Following in this line of thinking, FPCs address the issue by aspiring to reach out to a majority of stakeholders in a region. The diversity of any given food system is unique, but stakeholders (beyond mere consumers- everyone is a food consumer) are generally categorized into 5 groups, each of which is focused on a different piece of the food supply chain: Production, Processing, Distribution, Retail/Service, and Waste. In order to insure that no constituencies are left underserved by the food system, representatives from all groups of a society may be given a chance to raise concerns in a public forum when the need arises.

These moral mandates are perhaps lofty ideals, for we can note that our current food system falls short of providing the right to food for all of society’s members. Nevertheless, in order to move in a positive direction, we must define our goals in such terms. As Eric Holt-Gimenez notes, communities want “healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and the right to define their own food and agriculture systems... we need to *democratize* our food system in order to ensure equity and sustainability.” (2008. p15, italics added) Emphasis on democracy in decision making processes legitimizes an FPC’s claim to represent a community’s needs. Furthermore, the possibility of a democratically-organized food system holds implications to effect change in existing economic and social paradigms.

Current problems in conventional food systems

We may identify certain aspects of the conventional industrial food system in how it meets or fails to meet the food needs of society’s members. The problem is not that there is not enough food to eat; in fact, global food supplies could be shipped where needed to feed all starving people, but this action is not taken, largely because there is no opportunity for profit when poor people are hungry or starving. In addition to failing to meet the food needs of people, the conventional food system is often energy inefficient and environmentally degrading. It is now common that “produce will travel an average distance of over 1,500 miles before reaching the end consumer.” (Coit, 2009. p6) Such examples of food products grown and traded on a global scale tend to define food not as a biological necessity but rather as only a commodity in a marketplace. As economist Amartya Sen accurately points out, “there is no such thing as an apolitical food problem.”(1982. p459)

Schiff noted in 2007 that “symptomatic economic, social, and environmental problems caused by the industrial agricultural production, inefficiency and excess in energy use, and those apparent in the prevalence of diet-related illness indicate that... the conventional food system is ultimately inadequate and unsustainable... The conventional food system suffers from the absence of a systems approach among planners and policy makers that attempt to address food issues. To comprehensively solve food problems, it

remains necessary to address the entire system, rather than individual links, and the interrelationships between various stakeholders and components.”(Schiff, p55)

Framing food and agriculture as merely economic in scope neglects the essential cultural and environmental aspects of the food system. Too often negative effects and costs of food production are defined as externalities of a food production operation, and are thus subsidized or absorbed by the larger society or state. This profit-minded approach ignores the needs of human and biological communities, some examples include farm worker and biodiversity poisoning from economically efficient pesticide application, erosion from clear-cut forests replanted with annual crops for export markets, and deplorable living conditions for millions of animals in confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs). The current global food system, which for a long time has interconnected regions to support each other’s vital food needs through trade, has fostered unequal balance in food production and consumption, leading some regions to become almost completely reliant on distant regions to provide their basic needs (Coe et al, 2004). In an increasingly unstable world, such interdependent relationships are stressed: “The *root cause* of the crisis is a global food system that is highly vulnerable to economic and environmental shock. This vulnerability springs from the risks, inequities and externalities inherent in food systems that are dominated by a global *industrial agri-foods complex*.” (Holt-Gimenez, 2008. p4, italics in original)

Global trade of food products as commodities often benefits large-scale farms and their powerful managers more than international trade relationships benefit small family farms- this is mostly due to the economy of scale at which industrial agriculture can operate. Since food is traded globally, there is nearly always a market for a product, and larger shipments of food commodities are exclusively cost-effective in many circumstances. This is illustrated in almost every American grocery store where internationally-sourced produce items are nearly always cheaper than retail price of a comparable product produced locally (Kloppenburg et al, 1996). While the myriad production costs that contribute to such a price difference are too numerous and diverse to mention, what is significant is that the control and decision-making power in large-scale agricultural operations is far removed from any one community’s needs.

The effect of the global food system on local food economies in the US is measurable: smaller farms are unable to grow and process such large quantities, and thus have a higher price per unit produced. Local producers must become creative to attract a customer to their more expensive product in a marketplace in direct competition with industrial-scale agricultural systems. While some local producers fail and some succeed, all inevitably struggle, in the face of a difficult marketplace and a policy atmosphere that favors large-scale agribusiness. In order to restore community control in place of economic control of the food system, members of unrepresented sectors of the food system must be given a political voice and a chance to be counted and work alongside others as equal members of the system.

This strategy of including diverse food system stakeholder representation on food policy councils is the direct practice in democratizing the food system, rooted in an American tradition of democratic experiment. This is a radical change of direction from historically recent government policy-making, which has been dictated by agricultural experts and commodity associations invested in agribusiness. The influence of emerging

power bases on agricultural policy is a contested issue, one that has manifested uniquely in each region's food system.

Potential strategies for fixing food system problems

The food policy council model offers an attractive method for communities to begin to address areas where the food system falls short in their particular locality. Since each region has unique and specific needs, local control over decision-making is at the heart of most regionally-organized food groups. Some authors identify "a possible way of guarding against [domination of local food systems by industrial and international agricultural corporations] might be for alternative systems of food provision ...by creating or becoming involved with alternative networks." (Watts et al, 2005. p30)

The FPC directly involves community members, as representatives and stakeholders in their local food system, in the discussion around what the community wants and needs from its local foodshed. Most importantly, the FPC includes in this discussion community members who may otherwise not be included: "FPCs have the potential to democratize the food system. The failings of our current system are largely suffered in neighborhoods and constituencies with little political or economic voice" (Harper et al. 2009. p6). As Harper notes, many groups that have meager access to power and decision-making about food systems are usually those very same populations with the worst access to healthy food.

In addition to providing a representative voice to politically-invisible poor interests, FPCs also serve community food systems in other ways, most especially providing existing local organizations with a larger and better-coordinated network. In interviews with FPC coordinators and members, it was evidenced that "as networkers, FPCs indicated their function as a center point for gathering, coordination, networking, and facilitation to enhance and implement goals that meet the broad range of concerns among food system stakeholders."(Schiff, 2008. p226) Such a network is essential to developing a local food system in that it allows distinct and disparate organizations from all backgrounds of society to coordinate and work together on projects of common interest, all without formally committing one organization to another.

Movement halfway houses

One concept of particular relevance to discussion of FPCs is the 'movement halfway house.' Emerging from Aldon Morris' social movement theory, these halfway houses are described as established organizations that "develop a battery of social change resources such as skilled activists, tactical knowledge, media contacts, workshops, knowledge of past movements, and a vision of a future society."(1984. p140) Although Morris is discussing the Civil Rights Movement, Food Policy Councils may be serving such a function for the democratic food movement.

FPCs may be able to help emerging regional food movements by facilitating coordination, networking, and providing other resources to groups that can help each other. Even opposing interests may benefit from shared experiences with a FPC, such as gaining an increased understanding of others' points of view. By maintaining an independent but well-networked organization dedicated to the food system of a community or region, a new forum for discussion of problems is available to diverse constituencies.

Some community discussions come easier than others, and the presence of entrenched, antagonistic interests can sometimes deadlock a FPC in bitter argument. Such a scenario is undesirable, as is also a FPC where members are all in complete agreement on all policy stances- this may be a sign that diverse interests (which exist in every community) are not represented. The most desirable situation would be one in which opposing interests are represented, but are able to compromise with each other and work together towards a common objective.

Power legitimization in food systems

Food policy councils claim decision-making power by invoking the community's needs and by representing those needs in public discussion of food system planning. This itself is a significant departure from historical control of food policy in this country. In this way, political power over food systems is weaned away from the economic sector and its dominant theme of commodity crops as the basis of food policy focus. "A more socially and environmentally sustainable form of agriculture would entail treating food and agriculture differently from industrial products. Changing the way we produce food...will require new social networks and modern broad-based political movements: The transition to sustainable agriculture ultimately depends on a combination of efforts between farmers and economic and social institutions... a political project that engages the power of these institutions to permit, facilitate, and support sustainable farming."(Jonasse, 2009. p8-9)

A full transition to de-commodified agriculture (implied by food as a right) would entail a massive transformation in many local economies around the world. A power shift of such magnitude, while possible, will be neither quick, easy, nor probable. However, it is a mistake to assume that industrial commodity agriculture is the only relevant economic force. In fact, diverse food economies co-exist in every locale, each containing a unique mix of internationally-sourced commodity crops, regional and local agriculture products, and any number of processed and packaged food products; no two local food economies are identical, and each may respond differently to market forces.

FPCs assert a community's right to food through reclaiming political power of planning in the local food economy, and also provide a forum to make sure that the community's subgroups are also provided for, and not left behind in access to healthy food. As one author notes, "food policy councils are building political capital and capacity to move further in the development of more sustainable food systems." (Schiff, 2008. p226) The capacity-building and resource-accumulating nature of the FPC model sets it apart as a useful tool to bridge gaps from government policy makers to community members whose day-to-day lives and family livelihoods are shaped by that policy.

Community-government partnership

Collaboration and partnership of local government with constituencies within a community is a primary focus of many FPCs. While NGO groups can initiate projects on a wide variety of issues, formal planning and policy writing squarely rests in the hands of government officials. The government's purpose is to serve the needs of the community, but that community must be (sometimes excessively) vocal about problems, issues, or changes that need to take place in order to bring them to the attention of public officials. These officials can be anywhere on the continuum of helpful or restricting to community

progress, as well as being anywhere on the spectrum of knowledgeable or ignorant of community issues and needs. How public officials respond to NGO groups impacts where they fall on such a scale. Some case studies suggest investigators should focus “on how food justice movements initiate policy change [and] pay particular attention to NGO-state partnerships and the role of the state in facilitating or hindering policy changes.” (Wekerle, 2004. p380)

Government policy makers tend to be cautious and reactive; the argument may be that if there are no problems then the situation is stable and secure, and planning a new policy typically emerges in response to new situations. However, sometimes there may be problems that have failed to capture the state’s attention because the avenues for communication between community groups and government agencies may be inefficient or absent. As food policy planning experts have surmised, “creating and maintaining diverse coalitions was recognized as vital for implementing the political changes needed for long-term systemic reform.”(Tait & Liu, 2010. p12) Thus, it is increasingly important to have a FPC or similar networking organization to provide communication between government and non-government groups addressing common-interest issues in their community.

Study of the Toronto FPC provides insight into how public and private organizations have come together to address common issues in their community. The FPC deliberately “brought together agencies ... seeking long term solutions to the problems of hunger and the sustainability of the food system. To link communities to the political process, [Toronto FPC] co-chairs were a community representative and a city councilor.”(Wekerle, 2004. p382) This example of both public and private sectors having coequal decision-making and planning power has contributed to the Toronto FPC’s success in reaching diverse community groups and resources.

Too often, however, government planning and policy making has little input from marginalized and poor populations. The FPC model attempts to change this by arguing “participation of food-insecure groups in the policies that affect them should become a crucial element of all food security policies, from policy design to the assessment of results to the decision on research priorities.”(De Schutter, 2010. p18) It is recognized and vitally important that food policy be decided with local input, and not merely be administered from above with little regard to the unique aspects of each community. Many FPCs, on the other hand, have encountered some level of success in representing community needs to public officials. The partnership that has developed between government and NGOs with networking provided by FPCs has resulted in an “abundance of new projects and new networks that have emerged from the collaboration of a city agency and a wide range of community agencies.” (Wekerle, 2004. p384) This essential network-building capacity of the FPC model allows for open-ended possibilities when new connections are formed.

Such relationships between diverse food system stakeholders are essential in integrating different sectors of the regional food economy. Individuals on a FPC representing similar interests may share ideas and resources, or collaborate on projects. FPC members from opposing interests (such as alternative vs. conventional agriculture) must also share a table with their rivals and learn to cooperate to achieve common goals. Of course it is idealistic to believe this kind of collaboration is always achieved, but it remains important

that this aspect of the FPC model makes possible future development of truly sustainable systems through common-interest society-wide cooperation.

Implications for developing social justice

One exciting characteristic of the FPC model is that the community-organized, democratic process can be applied successfully to solving many other community problems. “FPCs create *democratic spaces for convergence in diversity*...FPCs hold great potential as action centers for the social learning needed to build democracy into the food system.”(Harper et al. 2009. p7, italics added) Most communities today have observed declining civic engagement over the past century, and the social skills of cooperating and coordinating large projects successfully between diverse groups has to some extent been lost. (Putnam 1995) FPCs allow for local community members to practice these skills and relearn strategies to maintain their autonomous decision-making. Indeed, the development of FPCs and the food-aware movement itself may be seen as a modern expression of local communities attempting to reclaim decision-making control over their food system, control which has increasingly rested in the hands of an agro-food power elite of business leaders and policy makers. Some communities have access to significant resources, including financial, social, and political capital, which support their cause. Other communities do not have these resources, and this lack of resources affects the direction, method, and chances of success for their ambitions. Thus the democratic food movement has been described as “not a cohesive movement, nor is it one that is organized by a particular group. Rather, it is a grassroots movement comprised of people.” (Coit, 2009. p2) That coalitions of individuals with personal interest, rather than industry lobbyists, are guiding the movement is significant.

Growing civic engagement related to food systems issues may well spill over into other areas of community organizing. As diverse individuals coalesce around a common cause, they learn of each other’s interests and projects, and relationships can expand into new spheres. A Food First (a California-based food policy institute) article observes that “the rise of Food Policy Councils points to a powerful and hopeful trend: Citizens and neighborhoods are directly influencing policy.”(2009. p3) Sustainable food systems are only the beginning, and communities self-organizing to plan their local food policy are taking the first steps towards establishing community economic self-reliance and widespread political autonomy.

Findings: Lexington in the national context

Given the diversity and depth of the healthy food movement on both a national and a local scale, it is interesting that the city of Lexington has no FPC of its own, although nearby Louisville has recently created one. In the region there do exist many food-related organizations, working in the public, the non-profit, and also the private sector. Furthermore, there are some food networking groups that meet regularly, with attendance from diverse backgrounds of the local food system. Hence, food policy is already being discussed locally in a variety of forums, some formal and others less so. However, these discussions have not yet coalesced into a single coordinated food policy organization focused on Lexington’s (and the surrounding region’s) food system. Recent local food conferences have continued to bring together community members interested in promoting local food systems, and I anticipate that a FPC for the area will be founded

within the next few years. Indeed, a FPC or similar networking organization would likely be beneficial to many organizations in the region, networking and sharing helpful information between groups to foster cooperation and innovative, multi-disciplinary strategies to address issues.

The attitude of most interviewees was either: ignorance of what a FPC is or does, and thus no desire or need for one; or general support for the idea but skepticism about the feasibility and benefit a FPC would offer the region. However, a continuum of attitudes was observed, ranging from a firm stance against the possibility of a FPC, to strong support and enthusiasm about the possibility, to individuals providing personal resources towards such a project. I did not find that support or reluctance towards a possible Lexington FPC was related to the interviewees' social status or position within the food system, rather it was individuals' past experiences with food policy organizations that informed their attitudes FPCs.

Findings: Issues in starting a Food Policy Council

Among the individuals who understood the FPC model, some of the major concerns that arose in discussions were: funding sources, membership selection, the possibility of an official sanctioned status, and personal political rivalries between various individuals within the local food system. The variety of issues and opinions raised by interviewees reflects the diversity of their points of view. However, it must be noted that since the food movement is growing and developing every day, it is changing much too fast for any one individual to make a completely accurate assessment. Rather than concrete claims, the issues raised may be understood as highlights of the local context from the perspective of invested stakeholders concerned with their personal situation within the food system. While no one individual may hold an unbiased view of the food system, many interviewees were knowledgeable through experience about both the details of the food system and also their personal context within their area of interest. In pursuit of a scientifically-objective view of food system stakeholders' understanding of the system as a whole, we may consider the collective thoughts of the group, noting both regular tendencies and also discrepancies. Furthermore, we will refrain from assigning any one individual with a higher status of accurate food system understanding, for each personal context is relevant to their reflection. Thus, a collection of cross-sector observations may well be the most accurate way to generate a combined perspective of relevant points to the issue.

Funding sources were often cited as a potential problem for a Lexington FPC. The situation in nearby Louisville was cited as a relevant example. Situated in much the same region with a slightly larger MSA population, Louisville's recently-founded Food Policy Advisory Council was started using funds from a community development grant awarded to the city in Spring of 2010. (Louisville FPAC Strategic Plan, 2012)

In order for Lexington to host a successful FPC, many interviewees felt that a solid and regular funding source, at least in the first few years of development, was essential. Financial capital was seen as necessary because it would provide crucial resources for administrative costs and also to fund new projects begun by the FPC, which in turn would establish the FPC as a legitimate and relevant organization. However, specific sources for the needed funding were not named- an issue raised was that potential funding opportunities for a Lexington FPC may well come from the same grant pool as the

funding for many other local or state food organizations. In this situation, the Lexington FPC would be in direct competition with its local member and partner organizations over financial resources, a situation that could impede good will and cooperation between such organizations.

Another significant point of discussion that arose in multiple interviews was that of representation and selection of potential FPC members. Most individuals were skeptical about the possibility of a small group of people accurately representing the needs of the Lexington MSA population of ~470,000. (Census 2010) In addition, people were concerned with the selection process- how members are elected or appointed, and who gets a say in that process.

Another issue raised was which organizations potential members would represent on the council. Many respondents were more involved in alternative rather than conventional food systems, and thus the discussion tended to assume that alternative food-network individuals would be the dominant force on the council. However, individuals representing conventional and industrial sectors of the local food economy should also be needed at the table. Despite the potential for opposing interests to come into conflict in a FPC setting, those interviewees who mentioned the conventional/ alternative food dichotomy maintained that all interests must have representation, even if that included organizational adversaries within the food system.

Findings: FPC necessary for food system progress?

The official status of a Lexington FPC was a more contentious issue. Some interviewees expressed the belief that a food policy group should originate from city government, while others preferred that an organization be formed independent of formal government ties. Those who were in favor of a government-housed FPC explained that having official status would give the new organization credibility among established food-focused NGOs and government departments. Indeed, the scenario of FPCs within local government's organizational infrastructure is a common model across the US, including Louisville's own FPAC.

However, some people thought that a non-government model would be better suited to the needs of Lexington. Their argument relied on the flexibility and political independence capable of an organization free of formal government obligations. The main benefit of this model, advocates claimed, was that the policy positions of the council could be decided by the FPC itself and not the overarching government leadership. Thus being independent of city government was seen as "an additional layer of transparency" for citizens to be assured that the council, and the individual members thereon, was making its own decisions. This argument also included a claim for credibility- but among ordinary citizens rather than formal organizations. Lexington's hosting an independent FPC would enable more citizens and groups to approach the council with concerns they may not raise in an official political setting.

One final common concern expressed in numerous interviews was a general attitude of sensitivity towards personal political beliefs of other food system stakeholders. Many individuals acknowledged that they have had past or ongoing disputes with various people throughout the food system. Opponents occupying positions in adversarial or competing organizations, where professional rivalry may develop into personal grudge,

was cited as having been the root cause of some of these conflicts. Some conflicts, however, were simply personal issues of people just not being compatible collaborators. Both of these causes contributed to a single, oft-identified potential problem- a splintering of group unity into antagonistic factions. Most interviewed viewed this possibility as detrimental to the purpose and benefit of a FPC, and some cited it as a probable contributing factor as to why a FPC has not yet been formed in Lexington. Ideally, personal disputes between individuals coming together for a large-scale collaboration could be put aside for the benefit of the project, but in reality such friendly cooperation does not always work out so smoothly. However, most people interviewed expressed generally positive judgment of their colleagues across the various sectors of the food system, and some remarked that adversarial individuals in the community “make up a small percentage of the population... but cause the most noise.” However, the potential for conflict when truly diverse representatives are brought together cannot be ignored, and must be factored into our considerations.

To be clear, most interviewees expressed concern and a desire for greater local food system collaboration. However, not all people felt that a food policy council was the only way to achieve desired collaboration, and that food system coordination could be achieved simply by utilizing networks and organizations already in place. A newly-established FPC established in a community could potentially draw membership and their contributions of social capital away from other preexisting groups, causing tension among community members. Many folks interviewed were already part of food-focused organizations, and thus already had access to networks of food systems members. Thus the population interviewed is more likely than the general population to be already connected to a network of individuals across the food system, and their answers must be considered in that context.

On the other hand, some individuals felt that a high level of collaboration among food systems stakeholders was an unrealistic and undesirable goal, citing the need for a competitive market to encourage a healthy local economy. For example, farmers may share certain common political interests regarding their occupation and lifestyle, but when they are actually selling their product to consumers, they are often in direct competition with each other. Having many businesses-producers, retailers, or restaurants-competing over limited local financial resources was mentioned as a stumbling block facing greater self-integration of the local food system.

Post-research development

Since completing this research project, I have begun to organize and facilitate monthly meetings to discuss food policy council concepts in our local context. The attendees have decided to name the group the Bluegrass Food Alliance Working Group, and our discussions have included possibilities of a local FPC, best organizational types for a FPC in Lexington, and other local democratically-focused food projects which would benefit the local food system. Over the past few months of meetings, different themes, topics, and consensus decisions have arisen, although the group is not a formal organization nor does it claim to be representative of the greater Lexington community. Rather, the group is a discussion space for interested parties to share ideas about what a FPC would look like in Lexington and the challenges and benefits such an organization would face. These ongoing meetings have broadened my research discussions into a collaborative effort of

various dedicated individuals who want to have a positive impact on the real-world local food system. Although the process is slow, each week new community members become aware or engaged with the project and local interest grows.

Potential challenges to the possibility of a local FPC include achieving representation from diverse parts of the food system, making sure traditionally disempowered constituencies are given representation and consideration, and general opposition from industrial food organizations to community food autonomy. Support from multiple departments of Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government would be essential, yet one must also consider the surrounding counties as partners in the local foodshed. The best practices of many national food policy groups could be assessed and implemented in the context of the Bluegrass region, but what ultimately will lead to success is a cooperation between diverse groups in the local community towards an effective use of unique regional resources to solve community problems in innovative and sustainable ways.

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