The Role of Food Policy Councils in Developing Sustainable Food Systems

Rebecca Schiff PhD a b

a Mountain Ridge Associates, Cochrane, Alberta
b Homeless Individuals and Families Information System, Regina, Saskatchewan

Published online: 11 Oct 2008.

To cite this article: Rebecca Schiff PhD (2008) The Role of Food Policy Councils in Developing Sustainable Food Systems, Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition, 3:2-3, 206-228

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19320240802244017

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
The Role of Food Policy Councils in Developing Sustainable Food Systems

Rebecca Schiff, PhD

ABSTRACT. Over the past 3 decades, several public and private organizations have fostered the creation of cross-sectoral “food policy councils” (FPCs) to engage and educate among a broad range of public, private, and academic institutions on theory and components necessary to the development of more sustainable food systems. Through an examination of data drawn from interviews with 13 food policy councils in the United States and Canada, this article examines the emerging role of FPCs in developing sustainable food systems. A grounded theory approach was utilized in collecting and analyzing information related to the organizational role of FPCs. Findings from interviews reflect on the overall “food policy council” concept and the role of these organizations in relation to government, policy change, facilitation, networking, and education. Significantly, interviews also indicated that FPCs actually focus more attention on programmatic as opposed to policy work.

KEYWORDS. Community food security, sustainable agriculture, food policy, food planning, sustainable development, education, institutional change

Rebecca Schiff, PhD, is a Research Associate with Mountain Ridge Associates in Cochrane, Alberta, and Coordinator for the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System in Regina, Saskatchewan.

Address correspondence to: Rebecca Schiff, PhD, Mountain Ridge Associates, Box 16, Site 9, RR 2, Cochrane, Alberta, Canada T4C1A2 (E-mail: rebecca.schiff@uregina.ca).

Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition, Vol. 3(2–3) 2008
Available online at http://www.haworthpress.com
© 2008 by The Haworth Press. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1080/19320240802244017
INTRODUCTION

Support for and interest in food policy councils has grown significantly since the creation of the first of these organizations in the early 1980s. Despite the growing interest in FPCs, there still exists a paucity of research on their function (organizational role) in relation to the development of sustainable food systems. This entails an understanding of the objectives and goals of FPCs and of their “organizational role(s)” (role(s) as an organization) in relationship to other individuals, organizations, and institutions. These organizational definitions and roles, which define the purpose and objectives of these organizations, are fundamental to understanding the nature of food policy councils. Understanding this role can provide a basis for understanding administrative structure and operations.

Discrepancies among definitions of “food policy councils” demonstrate a broader uncertainty and divergence in understanding the overall concept of the food policy council. Discrepancies relate more specifically to understanding whether food policy councils actually work on policy, implementing or recommending changes, their status as government or nongovernment organizations, and their relationship to alternative food movements such as community food security or sustainable agriculture. (For a definition and discussion of “alternative food movements” see Patricia Allen1 and Allen et al.2) In addition to these aspects of the nature of food policy councils, views expressed by various individuals, organizations, academics, and interviewees suggested a necessity for understanding the degree to which these groups function as networkers, facilitators, and educators.

Through an examination of data drawn from interviews with 13 food policy councils in the United States and Canada, this article examines the emerging role of FPCs in the development of sustainable food systems. A grounded theory approach was utilized in collecting and analyzing information related to the organizational role of FPCs. Opinions expressed by interviewees indicated dilemmas created by FPCs acting as government organizations. Advantages and disadvantages of FPCs being government or nongovernment organizations are discussed.

METHODODOLOGY

Two primary data collection methods were employed in this research: (1) objective review of relevant existing documents and (2) semistructured
interviews with key informants. The selection of sample participants aimed to include persons representing a variety of FPCs with different administrative arrangements, histories, and social/cultural contexts. FPC coordinators (staff persons or chairpersons) were chosen as representatives for interviews for two primary reasons: (1) they are usually the principal and only contact provided for the FPC in their publications and Web sites or in FPC contact lists provided by other organizations (also R. Bourhonesque, e-mail communication, October 19, 2005) and (2) as leaders or administrative centre-points, coordinators are usually required to work daily on FPC issues and therefore hold a significant amount of knowledge about the organization, its members, objectives, history, previous accomplishments, and challenges. In order to gather information about FPCs from several different viewpoints, a request was made by the researcher to speak with another participant such as a FPC member with a great deal of knowledge and history with the organization.

For purposes of maintaining confidentiality and to facilitate coding and analysis, each of the food policy councils in North America selected for evaluation was assigned a unique identifier: a randomly selected number from 1 to 13. Interviewees are purposefully not identified by their geopolitical representation to protect confidentiality. (This measure is especially critical in the case of “hybrid” FPCs as defined by Mark Winne [telephone conversation, September 16, 2005] where so few of these organizations exist that identification of their geopolitical level may serve to reveal their identity.) Since documents and interviews with food policy council representatives were primary sources of data, the findings presented here predominantly derive from these sources with additional and supplementary information derived from the other data collection methods. In examining the themes emerging from responses, quotations from interviews are frequently employed to describe in their own words, the experiences, successes, and challenges of food policy councils.

**DEFINITION AND ORGANIZATIONAL ROLES OF FOOD POLICY COUNCILS**

**The Food Policy Council Concept**

Numerous interviewees indicated that the terminology and value of the food policy council concept are debatable. One concern raised by interviewees relates to the great variety of terminology used by those various
organizations that fit the criteria set by definitions of “food policy council.” As suggested by several interviewees, the term “food policy council” remains inaccurate in several respects. One interviewee indicated that when the first FPCs emerged this particular terminology may have offered some advantages:

> It had a certain advantage, which is that it allowed the early supporters of this to fit the thing into a little niche that the established civil service was familiar and comfortable with, which is a policy (writer) and so therefore, by calling it a food policy council, and with the emphasis on policy, they were able to find a place that wasn’t challenging to the system. (Interviewee 7)

This interviewee also suggested that despite the incredible inaccuracies implied, the term has become so well founded in the past 15 to 20 years that changing the name “food policy council,” especially for particular organizations, would not be worthwhile:

> I find the word food policy council problematic. However, I’m not in any, until somebody comes up with a better name, I’m not trying to change it. It would take a big ruckus to change it. I’d have to make a strong case for it. It’s not important enough for me to change, but if I were starting new, in a new continent I don’t know that I would go with that.

The variability among terms used by these organizations became more pronounced with the rise in the number of FPCs in existence. The names of these organizations have become increasingly variable, mainly in respect to the terms “policy” and “council.” With respect to the term “policy,” those creating food policy council–type organizations over the past several years have employed names such as “food systems council,” “food security council,” or simply “food council” to omit the “policy” qualifier. The names of these organizations also vary with respect to “council” replacing this part of the terminology with “commission,” “committee,” “coalition,” “alliance,” or “advisory group.”

Also addressing the difference between the “food policy council and a coalition, Roberts and Scharff6 say that a food policy council may be “different from a typical coalition, where members are expected to represent an organisation’s or interest group’s point of view, and where members often have to delay decisions until they can go back to their sponsoring
organisations for an okay.” Three of the organizations represented in interviews that used some of this alternate terminology stressed particular opposition to the qualifier “policy,” stating explicitly that they did not do policy work and therefore were not “food policy councils.” This opinion remained despite the fact that these groups demonstrated adherence to a majority of the aspects defining food policy councils in existent definitions. According to FPC contact lists provided by other organisations (also R. Bournhonesque, e-mail communication, October 11, 2005) these groups are still considered as “food policy councils” despite the question-ability of their work on policy issues. The organizations fitting with definitions of “food policy council,” whether using this particular name or not, do not appear to solely concentrate on policy work or operate as a council to advise or recommend. The following sections examine the degree to which FPCs: are involved with policy or program development; function as government or nongovernment organizations; function as networkers and facilitators; are poised to function as alternative food institutions (AFIs); and function as educators in sustainability and food systems. (For a definition and discussion of “alternative food institutions” see: Allen1 and Allen et al.2)

Policy or Program Orientation

As indicated in the above discussion of “food policy council” terminology, the accuracy of the qualifier “policy” remains debatable. Jill Rubin’s research (J. Rubins, e-mail communication, September 27, 2005) suggests that food policy councils do very little policy work and instead focus on programs or projects from within existing government and private organizations’ policy frameworks. It is important to recognize here that the policy process and environment vary between local, regional, state, and national levels. Among local governments especially, management structures are often different, thereby affecting policy processes within individual government and government organizations and the associated work of the respective food policy council.7 The focus of this line of inquiry is not to examine the differences among FPC policy work in varying local government structures and state government structures. This investigation aims primarily to examine whether FPCs engage with policy processes, their potential organizational role in relation to policy-making, and the successes or difficulties that they encounter.

Several of those interviewed indicated a minimal involvement and even disinterest in researching, writing, or recommending new policies or changes to existing policies. Interviewees 1 and 7 discussed engaging
primarily in policy work as problematic because of the tendency for this type of activity to distract from or evade implementation:

I would say we deal . . . with programs rather than policy. Program, to me, is how you translate a policy into actionables and deliverables. How do you budget it? What’s the cost? What’s the parameter? Who’s responsible? . . . So to have food policy, I’m not particularly interested in making a contribution to food policy any more than I am into literary analysis. It’s just an academic area. I’m interested in developing programs that can be delivered. (Interviewee 7)

I think you could easily choke off the creativity and overly bureaucratize the issues . . . by trying to just do some policy stuff. (Interviewee 1)

Conversely, several interviewees described interest in policy issues in terms of researching, amending, recommending, and writing new food-related policy as an important focus or direction for their work. For those organizations operating initially under government mandate, their primary responsibility commonly remains developing policy recommendations as directed by the sponsoring agency/agencies. Two FPC groups felt that, during the stages of forming a food policy council, obtaining a government mandate specifically to work on policy recommendation was of primary importance in forming the organization:

In order to make change the big picture has to change. So a group that can look at policy and will be respected for policy, that is actually their mandate: for changing policy; seemed like it’s the next step. (Interviewee 2A)

These FPCs often begin with a focus on policy development and shift to a greater focus on programs (policy implementation) once recommendations have been submitted. Organizations without this type of mandate usually operate in an opposite manner, focusing initially on program implementation and moving later into policy. The perception that FPCs do little actual policy work may be attributed to the fact that most of these organizations, when in the first few years of existence, do not possess the resources, stability, networks, and respect to make policy recommendations to government. Once the resources and reputation are established, organizations can shift focus:
Where we are right now is needing to sort of simultaneously do the actual project work to build the expertise from which policy would be developed. (Interviewee 6)

We will need some things that are more like policy statements, like with farmers’ markets we need something there. We need a policy statement on them that brings with it some specific code changes. . . . But I think a comprehensive policy will probably come after we’ve knocked off some specific pieces like that. (Interviewee 1)

The degree to which FPCs can focus on policy issues also changes in relation to cycles in government and the amount of support available from elected officials. A lack of sufficient support can prevent FPCs from being able to focus on policy change:

I think it changes every six months . . . and six months from now the group could have a much stronger relationship with the mayor or twelve months from now. All of that stuff is constantly dynamic and constantly changing. But in the two and a half years I’ve been here . . . I haven’t seen them do much in terms of change policy in the city. (Interviewee 3A)

Although as described by this interviewee, some FPCs encounter difficulties in approaching policy work due to relationships with government, several organizations still maintained an intention to engage with food policy. Ten of the FPCs interviewed, including those expressing some disinterest in policy work, had previously worked with or intended at some future point to engage in policy work. While an investigation of the activities and programs of FPCs reveals minimal involvement in amending and recommending changes to food-related policies, interviews revealed contrasting interests and sentiments. Even for those FPCs without a history of this type of activity, the focus often remained on building credibility and resources to eventually allow for greater focus in this area. Drawing from interview responses, it appears that one potential role for FPCs to fulfill is to raise the awareness of government as to policy, changes to policy, and implementation mechanisms that can enhance food systems sustainability. While data collection did not specifically address the reasoning for the minimal focus on policy work of some FPCs, further research may be needed in this area.
The initial premise of the food policy council concept included a strong relationship with and basis in local government. Early FPCs such as those in Knoxville, Toronto, and Hartford, were created under orders, ordinances, and mandates to function primarily as a government organization. Over several years, as the number of FPCs increased, several of these organizations were developed as nongovernment, often nonprofit organizations (NGOs). The development of these two different types of organizations raises the debate over the importance of government involvement and whether or not food policy councils can or should operate as NGOs. While prior research has indicated that FPCs function most “successfully” as government mandated organizations, organizations continue to establish themselves and operate for several years as NGO food policy councils. Considering the value and reasoning behind creating FPCs as government entities or otherwise calls for reflection on what roles and functions FPCs play as nonprofit organizations as compared to government entities. This section examines the opinions and viewpoints revealed by interviewees as to the importance and significance of their relationship to and involvement with government.

The majority of interviewees indicated that recognition under a government ordinance was a critical and deciding factor in the creation of the FPC. One interviewee suggested that in the initial stages of formation of the FPC, the organizing group considered the advantages and disadvantages of creating the organization as a government or a nonprofit entity. This group, as did the majority of those interviewed, decided that association with government or being created as a government entity was the preferred method for operation of an FPC in their area. Several interviewees indicated the reasoning behind operating as a government organization, with a majority claiming that this strategy helped gain legitimacy for the organization:

I think being affiliated with (a government department) has given us legitimacy within the city. (Interviewee 11)

That’s kind of the beauty of the council, is that we’ve been given the mandate and kind of the authority and the connection to the (government) to look at these things and to move these ideas up. (Interviewee 8)

In contrast to this viewpoint, one organization felt that ratification as a government organization would create obstacles in working with other
nongovernment organizations. In this particular case, farmers and other organizations felt apprehensive toward government interests due to recent government activities that had been perceived as threatening.

We specifically say that we’re not city rato\textsuperscript{a} because a lot of farmers are quite opposed to the city . . . because through (changes to government) there’s been a lot of change for the rural area that hasn’t been welcomed. (Interviewee 6)

Despite the advantages and disadvantages of government ratification, this group still maintained a formal relationship with government through funding and in-kind resources including an office in a government department. The provision of these resources by the government also encouraged the development of working relationships between the FPC and various government agencies. This “hybrid” model, including some formal relationship with government through funding, resources, or otherwise while maintaining some NGO or nonprofit status, can offer some of the advantages of status as both a nonprofit and a government entity. (For the purpose of this research, government mandate is considered to separate government entities from hybrid and purely nonprofit FPCs.) One interviewee commented on some of these advantages with special consideration given to networking and liberty to discuss and voice opinion in respect to controversial issues:

That’s been the power of this particular model: is the fact that it straddles both the community-based organisation, non-profit model, and the government-bureaucracy-institution model and because it straddles both worlds I think it has the opportunity to be able to articulate a very specific stance without having to deal with the politics all the time or with the non-profit side all the time. (Interviewee 11B)

While this hybrid model may prove advantageous in some respects, certain situations and approaches to organizational structure may enable FPCs to maintain autonomy and strong relationships with the nonprofit and with the government sector without use of the hybrid model. One interviewee suggested that one significant advantage of operating primarily as a government entity included the ability to develop stronger, more

\textsuperscript{a}rato: ratified by the municipal government as an institution of that government.
trusting relationships with nonprofit organizations. This interviewee felt that there already existed too many NGOs competing for the same grants and funding. Since the FPC did not operate as an NGO, it would not be seen as a competitor. In contrast to the threat posed as a competitor, through the ability to function as a central organization with connection to government and a wide variety of food system sectors and resources, nonprofits view the FPC as an organization that works to further their interests and aids in acquiring funding and other resources:

When I walk into a room of NGOs they all know: “This guy works to get us more money.” Then they are real nice to me. If I was walking into the room and they say: “This guy is looking for the same pot of money that we are,” it would be a totally different relationship. Totally. So that’s why I wouldn’t even entertain the notion. You add no value to the system. You’re just another drain on an over-expanded system. (Interviewee 7)

Interviewee 13 expressed a similar sentiment, indicating that the strength of the nonprofit sector in North America dilutes the effectiveness of FPCs created solely as nonprofit organizations. When speaking to the nature of operating as government organizations, several interviewees indicated that, as a government entity, the ability to translate wider perspectives and citizen voices and gain authority to implement recommendations through food policy and planning remained one of the more significant roles of the government-mandated FPC:

We need the people that are on the ground, who know the issue really, really well and have dedicated themselves to just that issue but might not necessarily have the connection to get what they want to get done at the (government) level done. So that’s hopefully kind of the role that we’re trying to fill. (Interviewee 8).

The role that government FPCs fulfil in this respect relates strongly to that of acting as a citizen voice and facilitator for the advancement of public interest. Whether functioning as a nonprofit, hybrid, or primarily government-based organization, all of the FPCs interviewed described one of their primary roles as being a voice for recommending new ideas or changes to government activities surrounding food policy and planning. While operating as a government entity can provide some degree of authority to aid in fulfilling this role, creation strictly as a nonprofit or as
one of numerous committees or councils in a local government can lessen
the strength and effect of this voice.

In contrast, suggestions of Interviewees 9A and 9B indicate that formal
association with government may restrict the ability of these organiza-
tions to propose changes to government structures and policy. In other
words, it may be difficult to “to operate within a system and at the same
time propose alternatives to that system” (Interviewee 9B). In fulfilling
the role of citizen voice to government, food policy councils indicated the
need to strike a balance between authority within government, freedom of
expression, and ease of communication among a wide variety of food sys-
tem stakeholders. As the majority of interests expressed in interviews
revealed, a significant role for FPCs to fulfil involves bringing together
and raising the visibility of a broad spectrum of food system interests in
government policy, planning, and decision-making activities.

**Food Policy Councils as Networkers and Facilitators**

An aspect of, and addition to, the role of food policy councils as voices
for system-wide changes in governance for food policy and planning is the
role that FPCs fulfill as networkers across the spectrum of food system
interests and facilitators in the networking and implementation capacity of
other organizations. Networking is central to the food policy council con-
cept in that the role of networker allows the FPC to draw connections
between disparate stakeholders in the food system. As articulated by Inter-
viewee 9A, “The goal is to create a system out of which people can com-
municate their ideas, talk to each other.” Interviewee 12 indicated that
information exchange and the networks created among members through
the operation of the FPC was one of the most valuable and lasting legacies
of the organization. In this context, FPCs relate to the concept of the learn-
ing organization “where people continually expand their capacity to create
the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking
are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are
continually learning to see the whole together.”

Bringing together this diversity of viewpoints, expertise, and experience
can create tensions among members such that staff, meeting chairpersons,
or other organizational leaders need to fulfill roles as facilitators to unite
and develop innovative ideas out of sometimes conflicting interests:

> We’ve got a wide range of people who have a different finger on
different pulses of a food system. We’re not all agricultural people,
we’re not all food banking people. We’ve got nutritionists, we’ve got gardeners, we’ve got a wide range of folks. So yeah, I kind of think facilitating is really a large part of what we need to do. (Interviewee 3B)

In this capacity, the FPC as a whole fulfills the role of facilitator and convenor for inclusiveness of viewpoints from across the food system. This aspect of facilitation at the most basic level involved the members and their viewpoints as individuals. At another level, this sort of networking facilitation relates to the businesses, organizations, institutions, and community groups that members represent. One role that members may play is in bringing the interests and activities of the FPC to their own constituencies for implementation or to help these ideas “come alive.” What the FPC is asking members is “will you take our ideas to your constituency and make them come alive?” and then bring their problems to us so we can wrestle with it in this broader context. The FPC asks members “to serve here as the dynamic, experienced people who can bring (the FPC) issues” (Interviewee 7). In this manner, FPCs serve to create new networks among members’ organizations and facilitate the expansion and implementation of their interests by bringing them into the broader food system context. This role carries through, outside of facilitating communication between members’ networks and organizations, to facilitation and networking among other organizations with which the FPC develops relationships. Developing connections and capacity for communication with organizations external to the FPC involves building relationships with and among businesses, nonprofit organizations, government institutions, and community groups. Drawing ideas from and facilitating these networks is a crucial role for FPCs to fill, especially with respect to the need to include a much wider range of participants than membership structure might allow for and draw connections between all of the various aspects of food systems:

It’s good for us to see ways that we can connect. . . . I think that’s the best thing we can do and not work in a vacuum. I mean that’s not what a food system is. (Interviewee 3B)

Through these interests, FPCs also fulfill a role as facilitator for community consultation and voice for the concerns of community interest groups. Interviewee 2A discussed this activity as one of the most significant roles of the FPC in that it is “critical to get into it with other community groups
absolutely . . . it’s the very heart of what we’re about.” Working with community groups and other types of organizations in this respect not only helps to create and broaden networks but also eases the implementation of the FPCs planning and policy interests.

The most successful programs, as described by interviewees, involved situations where the FPC developed program or project ideas and worked with members’ constituencies and other organizations for implementation and continued work. Interviewee 1 indicated that for the FPC, a critical role “is trying to be an instigator, that can successfully move some projects forward, help others in the community” to move forward with implementation and project maintenance. Working with other organizations in this manner was highlighted throughout interviews as the most advantageous approach to implementation. This approach offers two benefits. One benefit relates to the limited capacity for FPCs to independently implement all project ideas due to, most significantly, the broad spectrum and multitude of food systems projects and to funding or other resource limitations. As Interviewee 3B described, facilitating other groups to manage these activities removes from the FPC some of the difficulties of project implementation and managing all the finer details of multitudinous projects:

Those things are the kinds of things we can do: take a project on, give light to it, and then sort of pass the torch a little bit because we can’t carry all the torches and our job is to coordinate how we respond to a number of different issues.

This allows the FPC to avoid redundancy in duplicating the work of others while adding to those activities already in place:

We are formed to research, investigate, and develop recommendations . . . they get farmed out to who needs to be doing those recommendations. And so it’s not our job to duplicate what other groups are doing but to enhance them. (Interviewee 8)

Another benefit of this approach involves the recognition gained for partner organizations. This type of facilitation allows for politicians, community groups, nonprofit organizations, academic institutions, and others to gain some of the much-needed or sought after credit for these projects. Enabling these individuals and groups to carry out or implement the innovative project proposals produced by the network of food system
stakeholders, and to take credit for these activities, also helps the FPC to avoid being seen as competition to other organizations and build much-needed political capital. Food policy councils can “get things done” and fulfill the roles of networker and facilitator by leading “life as a link-tank.” In this capacity, interviewees indicated their FPCs’ role in operating as a center point for the convergence, coordination, networking, and facilitation to enhance and implement goals which meet the broad range of concerns among food system stakeholders.

**Food Policy Councils as Educators in Sustainability and Food Systems**

Overall, interviews and research revealed the primary functions, demonstrated and proposed, of food policy councils as coordination points and, through this networking, as communicators and educators on sustainability and food systems. Communication and education occurs at two different levels. The first level involves education of staff, members, and their constituents. The second level involves coordinating communication among and education of entire communities including government agencies, businesses, other organizations, community groups, and individuals. Communicating ideas, information, and education also occurs through a variety of outlets. Some of these outlets are based in project activities of FPCs such as information booths and events, publication of informational material, and e-communication technologies. Other outlets for this communication relate to the facilitation of other individuals and groups for the implementation of project ideas and educational activities that occur as a component of FPC meetings. Some more nebulous outlets of communication exist as well in respect to a continuous exchange of knowledge and information among council participants and their constituent organizations, governments, businesses, nonprofit organizations, community groups, and the public.

**Internal Education**

Internal education, that is, communication, information exchange, and education for council members, surfaced as one the foremost interests and concerns of interviewees. The State and Local Food Policy Councils project highlights the importance of information-sharing activities in that FPCs:

Can be an effective and efficient process to provide education and share information where people involved in all different parts of the
food system and government can meet to learn more about what each does and consider how their actions impact other parts of the food system.

There is a strong focus of FPCs on education and communication evidenced in the activities of the entire FPC community and the information and viewpoints revealed by interviewees. Interviewee 3B felt that there existed a general and vested interest among the public in learning about food issues and helping to increase food security. The FPC then played the lead role in facilitating this education and communication of knowledge or experience:

I really am of the belief that everybody wants to make a difference and everybody would like to do good things, and for the world to work well. And so sometimes we need to just, you know, let people know how they can help make that happen. And I think people are ready to be educated about things and learn how to do things better.

Another interviewee felt that the enduring legacy of connections and shift from conventional to food systems perspectives among participants was the most significant result and achievement of the group. This interviewee also indicated food policy council meetings as a crucial point for educational and communication activities. In the case mentioned above, food policy council meetings allowed at least one hour of a two-hour meeting exclusively for information-sharing among participants. Other interviewees indicated a similar focus. Interviewee 8 identified “educating ourselves to make our food system more effective and improve it, move it forward” as one of the most significant accomplishments of the organization.

The majority of interviewees described the inclusion of presentations from outside individuals and organizations as an integral component of food policy council meetings. As one interviewee stated, at FPC meetings “you don’t just talk business but you bring in somebody with a new idea.” Presentations usually focus on topics of interest to the food policy council members. They may be based on topics or speakers suggested by council members, items related to council priorities, on the proposal of the presenter, or organized by staff to shift or manage the FPC’s focus and priorities. Several interviewees described the invitation of certain speakers as a deliberate move to educate and focus the conversation of the FPC on particular subjects. For example, Interviewee 7 articulated a growing
concern for the linkages between food and energy (oil) which demanded education of participants on the nature and specifics of the issue.

Our food policy’s gotta be based on an oil policy or an energy policy. And so, we’ll be working, girding up, the food policy council to become a battering ram on that issue and to have the education and knowledge to move it out.

Inviting outside speakers represents one avenue for the food policy council to educate, connect, and communicate with external organizations and individuals. Interviewee 3A described the mutual benefits gained by members and outside participants through the invitation to others for presentations at FPC meetings:

On occasion . . . we would invite people to the meetings who would tell us what they’re doing . . . and they would always be surprised that this meeting even existed, that this group of people existed, and they would tell us what they’re doing and then we would suggest, you know “have you contacted this person?” because we’re a wealth of knowledge.

Another interviewee described the importance of remaining knowledgeable about programs and activities occurring in the wider community. Regular presentations were held during council meetings to achieve this and to instigate discussion around related program, project, or policy recommendations.

We had them make a presentation about that so kind of a “let’s talk about some really great programs out there that are really kind of breaking barriers” and that got all the council members talking and like “oh, we should do this and that and this” and it was really great. (Interviewee 8)

**External Education**

External education, i.e., educating those who are not members of the FPC, occurs through the networks and affiliate organizations of members as well. FPC members gaining new knowledge and broadening networks through their involvement with the council communicate ideas and project proposals to their constituent organizations so that the sphere of
education and influence grows wider. Interviewee 1 describes the experience of the food policy council in educating government representatives and agencies through the networks and communication of FPC members:

The comments we got from people, from other city council members and the mayor at the (beginning) were like: “boy, when you brought this up we just didn’t know what you were . . . we just sort of went along with it but I think you’re kind of ahead of us on it and I see the connection here.” So . . . it felt like we sort of cleared the bar of relevance and I think of making this and food something we would look at as a local government. So I think . . . that is one of the bigger things that we’ve (done), apart from any of the specific projects, I think part of the effort to elevate the importance of the issues and help people look for some of those connections.

Organizations that were not consciously aware of their relationship to the food system gained insight into the influence of their activities in certain areas.

Outside of the direct lines of communication between members, staff, and constituent organizations, FPCs also engage significantly in communicating principles of sustainable food systems with communities, the public, and partner organizations through project implementation activities. One form of this type of communication occurs through release of informational materials, use of communications technologies, and participation in celebrations or events, while another form relates to the facilitation of partners to carry out FPC program and project ideas. Informational materials published by FPCs include resources such as “buy local” guides, published reports (such as food system assessment reports), educational or informational brochures, newsletters, or guidebooks. These materials act as an important vehicle for public education on sustainability and food systems, the roles and activities of the food policy council, and guides for public involvement in food systems work. Publication and distribution of these materials can form an important foundation for the overall effort and other activities of the FPC:

We probably will start focussing a little more on . . . development of more literature and fact sheets and education about the role of food in preventing disease and that sort of thing. Communications is a big part of our total effort. We have a good website. We have a newsletter going to about seven or eight thousand people that really talks a
lot about the council and our work and so we’re bringing a lot of public awareness to the whole issue and all in hopes, you know, that some day all of these forces will come together. (Interviewee 10)

All of the FPCs interviewed, with the exception of two very recently formed, had published and distributed informational brochures and participated in collaborative efforts to publish food guides or some type of food system assessment. In contrast, virtually all of the food policy councils shied away from and avoided contact with external media such as radio, newspapers, journals, or television. A few interviewees mentioned that although media exposure was not sought after, requests for interviews would in most cases not be turned down. Interviewee 6 described the interest of the media in pursuing interviews with the FPC and others on one particular issue as useful for indicating public interest and where to direct the focus of activities:

We had media asking us for interviews. . . . It was all extremely positive. It felt great that that was something clearly that (the public) could get behind and see as a positive thing for the (community) and there were . . . excellent articles on buying locally and exposing the issue . . . just days before the interview that we did. . . . So that was really great and that’s why we’re feeling that the buy local initiative is very strong right now and there is incredible interest around it so that’s what we’re focussing on.

Three different reasons were indicated, however, for general avoidance of the media. Some simply reported a lack of interest in pursuing these lines of communication, whereas others cited a potential danger in attracting possible adverse attention of public officials or organizations that could threaten the stability of FPC political, public, and resource support. One interviewee cited an additional reason, describing part of the FPC role in facilitating other individuals and organizations as allowing these groups to take the recognition for achievements. In many ways, allowing politicians and struggling nonprofits to take recognition through the media and otherwise helps the FPC to gain much-needed and valuable political capital.

Another method for enabling communication and education of the public occurs through the use of communications technologies such as e-mail, electronic newsletters, listservs, and Web sites. Virtually all FPCs maintain a Web site providing general and sometimes more specific information
on membership, ordinances, organizational structure, meetings, accomplishments, publications, and activities. The types of informational materials mentioned above may also be published on FPC Web sites. Online publication of “buy local” or food guides has been attempted by some FPCs with considerable success, significantly increasing the number of visitors to Web sites. One interviewee described the usefulness of using online publication for increasing the number of Web site visitors and awareness about FPC activities:

It was a very practical, small in scale although a very comprehensive endeavour but it has been very useful. It has been successful at raising awareness about people using local food and I think raising awareness about the (FPC) and the number of people coming to our website has I would say almost doubled. (Interviewee 9A)

Communication and public education also occurs through hosting or participating in conferences and other events. Hosting events or conferences can be quite time demanding and needs to be considered carefully before implementation in terms of logistics, resources, and volunteer time available. However, this type of activity can serve as an excellent avenue for attracting public attention, raising awareness, and education. Another method for participation in public events and celebrations can occur through holding information stalls or otherwise participating in events hosted by other organizations. This expands educational opportunities while avoiding some of the pressures and responsibilities associated with organizing conferences, forums, and other affairs.

Another significant aspect of the communication and education role of FPCs relates to their involvement in the facilitation of other groups for the implementation of recommendations and projects. One of the most crucial stability and survival methods for food policy councils involves communicating, networking, educating, and facilitating other groups to take over project implementation. FPCs also facilitate the creation of other groups or networks to share information and learn among themselves. This was frequently described by interviewees as a significant role or responsibility of the FPC:

I think that’s part of the commission’s responsibility is, you know in any good project the best thing you can do is educate other people
about the project so that it’s not, we don’t need be the end-all, do-it-all people. (Interviewee 4a)

Another interviewee described the interest of an overseas government in the activities of the FPC. In this situation, the food policy council provided information and education for the foreign government on the value of food work for people living with AIDS. Following implementation of some of the provided examples and ideas, the government returned to the FPC to learn about further uses of food programs as a tool in social work:

As a result of coming here they started a good food box program and community gardening because I showed them, “Here’s how if you’re gonna live positively with AIDS. You do it with food.” So, and they just came back for a second tour on how to use work with food to influence youth. (Interviewee 7)

Food policy councils can act as a “hub of knowledge” or a resource and learning centre for those interested in food systems work and activities. While, as noted above, Interviewee 3A illustrated this in relation to FPC meetings, other interviewees described this in a more general sense:

That the (FPC) would be a hub of information that people could access and find out if they wanted to join a collective kitchen what would they do, if they wanted to start a collective kitchen what would they do, do they want to be a member of a CSA what should they do, do they want to learn about canning, like all of those sort of basics of food security entry points that the (FPC) would be a hub of that information and skills building as a basis for doing some of the other work. So that’s definitely our focus right now is building that very basic awareness in the community. (Interviewee 6)

CONCLUSIONS

The findings and analysis of research conducted on FPCs in North America has suggested significant similarities in experiences and recommendations of their role in supporting the development of more sustainable food systems. Interviews indicated 4 primary concerns in regards to FPCs’ organizational role.
The first concern involves a tension between policy and program work. Due to sometimes unstable relationships with government, many FPCs encounter difficulties with policy work, focusing instead on programmatic work. Despite this tension, several organizations still maintained an intention to engage with food policy with a focus on programmatic work that could build credibility and resources to eventually allow for greater focus in this area. Another primary concern was the tension involved with the decision to establish as either a government-mandated or nongovernment organization. All of the FPCs interviewed described one of their primary roles as being that of a voice for recommending new ideas or changes to government activities surrounding food policy and planning. They also indicated a need to strike a balance between authority within government and the ability to maintain perspectives from “outside the system.” The majority suggested that establishment as a government entity can provide some degree of authority to aid in fulfilling a role as policy advocate, whereas creation strictly as a nonprofit or as one of numerous committees or councils in a local government can lessen the strength and effect of this voice.

The two roles most emphasized by interviewees related to their activity as networkers and facilitators and the most emphasized issue addressed in interviews—their primary role as educators in food systems sustainability. 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. The role of networker and facilitator was seen by numerous interviewees as working in coordination with the FPC’s roles as educators. Research results highlighted that using resources, knowledge, and ideas to help others implement programs is where the strength lies to institutionalise food system perspectives. The education of a broader public is occurring not through the FPCs but the public’s hands-on implementation of programs.

In building the capacity of others to implement, and in educating, food policy councils are building “political capital” and capacity to move further in the development of more sustainable food systems. Building political capital or influencing government decision-making, policy, and planning remains a primary goal in these efforts. All of the FPCs represented in interviews, whether government, nongovernment, or hybrid organizations, suggested this as either one of or the central premise in their existence as an FPC and understanding of the food
policy council concept. Working with this basic understanding of their function, we can then move on to examine how FPCs, through structuring of administrative components and operations, can build capacity to fulfill their organizational roles. This suggests a need for further research to examine the various components of administrative and operational capacity building. These components could potentially then point toward administrative models for food policy councils that prove effective in fulfilling the functions and roles of food policy councils.

REFERENCES


