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Understanding Food Policy Councils: Lessons for Extension Partners

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Abstract. This paper presents findings from a survey of 34 food policy councils (FPCs) in California. The survey addressed organizational structure and functions, policy priorities and achievements, and the use of research or other information. We find that most FPCs have formed in recent years, operate with small budgets and limited or no staff, and function primarily to foster network relationships. FPCs rely on community-based knowledge more than academic research, suggesting an opportunity for Extension professionals to lend expertise. We conclude by identifying specific ways Extension professionals can support FPCs as they seek to enhance local and regional food systems.

INTRODUCTION

Food Policy Councils (FPCs) bring diverse community members together with local government to engage in food systems planning, with the overall goal of promoting the social, economic, and environmental health of local communities and their regions (Harper et al., 2009; Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999). Extension professionals share these broad goals and work with many of the same stakeholders, so it is not surprising that some FPCs develop close partnerships with local Extension offices to facilitate their work (Fitzgerald & Morgan, 2014). While there is a growing literature describing FPC organizational forms, challenges, priorities, activities, and outcomes (Bassarab et al., 2019; Coplen & Cuneo, 2015; Fitzgerald & Morgan, 2014; Harper et al., 2009; Hatfield, 2012; Scherb et al., 2012; Schiff, 2008; Yu et al., 2015), little of the existing research uses this knowledge to examine the specific ways that Extension offices and professionals can be useful FPC partners. Our work seeks to fill this gap in the literature, drawing on research examining FPCs in California.

FPCs emerged in the late 1980s as stakeholders in the sustainable agriculture and food and nutrition movements began to pay more attention to community food systems. Early FPCs were created by and embedded within local government, much like a planning or social service commission (Clancy et al., 2008; Dahlberg, 1994). As the local food movement expanded in the 2000s, a newer generation of FPCs emerged, typically organized as nonprofit organizations

or community coalitions that could bring a more diverse group of food system stakeholders into the planning process and avoid bureaucratic restrictions (Schiff, 2008). These nongovernmental FPCs take diverse organizational forms and prioritize different issues, seeking to tailor food policies to the specific concerns of their local setting. While no two FPCs are alike, most share the goal of addressing food issues holistically, and thus seek broad-based representation from farmers, distributors, retailers, food service operations, government agencies (such as public health, county social services, and county agriculture departments), and food-related community organizations. By examining issues such as hunger, nutrition, and sustainable agriculture in relation to one other (Borron, 2003), they can avoid the tendency of government agencies to treat food-related problems in narrow, conflicting, and ineffective silos (Fox, 2010). By contrast, FPCs aspire to a systems analysis that links issues such as access to healthful food, land use planning, regional food procurement, food waste, food and economic development, local food processing, and regulations related to urban farming or community gardening (Harper et al., 2009).

Building on this previous research, our University of California Cooperative Extension team used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to study food policy councils in California during the years 2015–2018. At the time, California had more than 30 active food policy councils, the largest number of any state and approximately a tenth of all the councils the Johns Hopkins Center for a

Livable Future has identified in its annual survey covering the United States and Canada (Sussman & Bassarab, 2017). As reported elsewhere (Gupta et al., 2018a; Gupta et al., 2018b), a major component of the research was a comparative case study analysis of a diverse set of 10 California food policy councils, drawing on more than 60 key informant interviews, observations of FPC meetings, and review of documents. Building on the fine-grained case study findings, and to test their broader applicability, we then surveyed all California FPCs. This article describes the results of that survey, conducted in partnership with the Johns Hopkins researchers. They graciously allowed us to add a module of additional questions suggested by our case studies to their regular survey of FPCs when it was fielded in California.

METHODS

Using Qualtrics software, we distributed the survey by email to primary contacts of all 34 food policy councils in California in early 2018. We generated the list of contacts by consulting the national Food Policy Network database, the California Food Policy Council (a statewide food policy council at the time), and our own list of FPCs.

Thirty-one (31) food policy councils responded to the survey (a 91% response rate), including 29 that were active and two that described themselves as in transition (defined as meeting infrequently and/or redefining the structure or purpose of the council). The survey included all of the questions from the 2018 Johns Hopkins FPC survey (www.foodpolicynetworks.org/food-policy-resources/?resource=1302), plus additional questions we crafted that were reviewed by all our team members for clarity and validity. These additional questions included a) *process questions* about how the FPC makes decisions, whether it provides leadership opportunities for members, and additional details about community engagement activities; b) *outcome questions* about specific types of policy changes the FPC worked on and the importance of various relationships to policy achievements; c) *challenges* faced by the FPC; and d) *types of information the FPC used*, frequency of use, and where such information was accessed. The goal of these questions is to help Extension professionals understand more specifically how they might assist FPCs as part of their ongoing responsibilities.

While the majority of the questions were closed-ended, multiple choice questions, we included a few open-ended questions. These were coded for key themes using an iterative process in which one team member did the initial coding, which was then reviewed and refined by the entire team. Where the survey findings were starkly divergent from the earlier case study findings, we reviewed the data more carefully to note the nature and possible reasons for the discrepancy. Not all respondents answered each question, and the total sample size for particular questions varies.

Where we report percentages they do not always total 100% due to rounding errors, or because respondents could select more than one response to a particular question (e.g., “What were your three biggest challenges?”).

In reporting results here, we have focused on those results that can best inform Extension professionals as they consider creating or deepening partnerships with an FPC. These results are selected from the overall survey including the additional questions described above. The survey assessed: (1) *the organizational structure*, geographic focus, membership, and function of their FPC, as well as connection to government, funding, and budget and decision-making processes; (2) *organizational and policy priorities*, community engagement activities and achievements, policy outcomes, advocacy activities, relationships important for policy success, and greatest challenges; and (3) *their use of research and other information* to achieve their goals, frequency using various types of information, and where FPCs accessed this information.

FINDINGS

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION OF FOOD POLICY COUNCILS

Age and Geographic Scope

Food policy councils in California are a recent phenomenon, with 22 of the surveyed FPCs having formed between 2009 and 2018 and seven between 1998 and 2008 (two did not answer this question). Most organize themselves within county boundaries (20, 65%), with others organized at the city/municipality (6, 19%), regional (2, 6%), city and regional (2, 6%), and statewide (1, 3%) scales.

Structure

Consistent with previous research findings, we find that California FPCs take diverse organizational forms. Many report they are housed in other nonprofits (15); others are embedded in local government (3), and one operates as its own nonprofit (1). The remaining FPC respondents checked “other” and wrote in a variety of other organizational forms including a grassroots coalition transitioning to a more formal organization, a task force of a city/county, an informal association, and a collaboration of public and nonprofit entities.

Funding

More than half (17, 55%) of FPCs surveyed reported receiving funding. Another eight (26%) indicated they have received funding in the past but not at present, and six (19%) reported they have never received funding. Even among the funded organizations, the amount received is modest, with only a handful garnering more than \$10,000 in the most recent year.

Understanding Food Policy Councils: Lessons for Extension Partners

Funding sources reported included in-kind donations (11); private foundation funding (10); grants from local, state, or tribal government (8); and individual donations (7). Two FPCs reported earned income from goods and services while only one has membership dues.

Connection to Local Government

Although 12 (39%) FPCs reported no formal connection to government, a strong majority reported having one or more of the following connections: government employees as members of the council or participating in meetings (19); local or state government personnel seeking advice or recommendations from the FPC (9); local, state, or tribal government personnel supporting the FPC with in-kind donations, staff support, etc. (5); and the FPC was created by legislation (2), or members of the FPC are appointed by government officials (1).

Membership Composition

We asked FPC respondents to characterize members using pre-set categories. The numbers reported below indicate, in descending order, the number and percentage of all 31 FPCs in which at least one person in that category is represented.

- Food production (farming, ranching, aquaculture) (30; 97%),
- Community (29; 94%),
- Public health (29; 94%),
- Anti-hunger/emergency food (29; 94%),
- Government agency staff (22; 71%),

- College/university/community college (e.g., Extension) (22; 71%),
- Social justice (22; 71%),
- Natural resources and environment (19; 61%),
- Elementary and secondary education (17, 55%),
- Food waste/disposal (17, 55%),
- Health care (17, 55%),
- Faith-based organizations (14; 45%),
- Food retail (14; 45%),
- Farm/food industry workers (13, 42%),
- Elected officials (12; 39%),
- Youth (12; 39%),
- Food processing/distribution (11; 35%),
- Economic development (10; 32%),
- Philanthropy (8; 26%).

Functional Roles, Priorities, Activities

We asked survey respondents to select their top three organizational priorities out of 12 pre-set options, with an opportunity to select “other” and write in responses. As shown in Figure 1, no single priority was mentioned in more than half the cases. The most commonly mentioned organizational priorities were “Advocacy and policy capacity building” (13, 41%), “community engagement” (13, 41%),

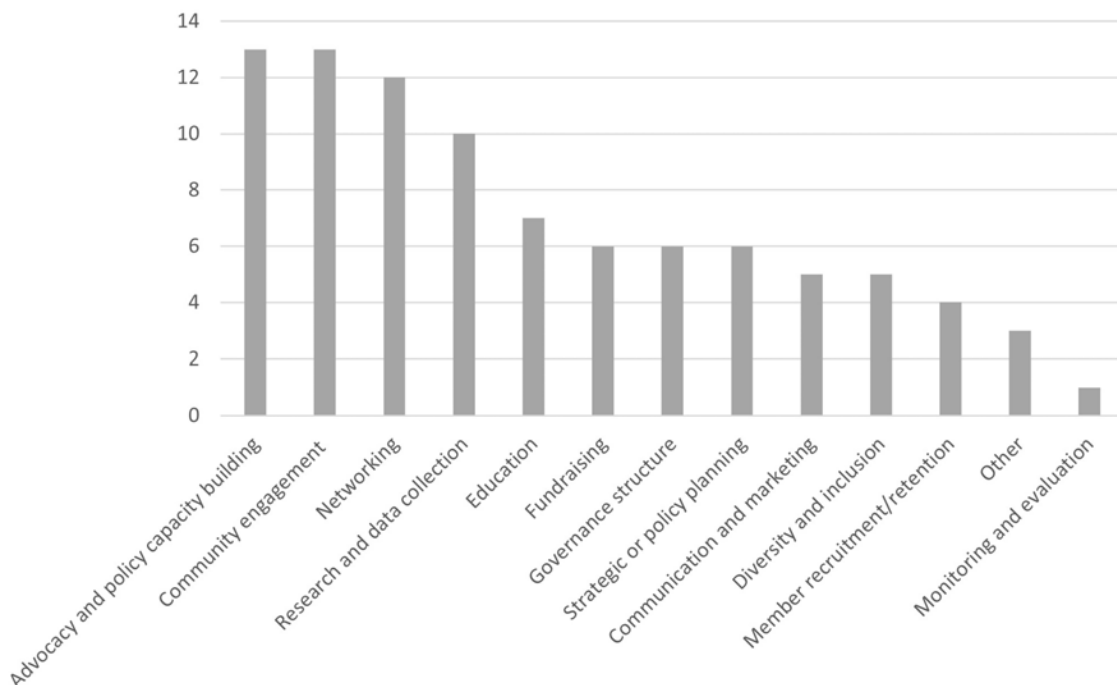


Figure 1. Top three organizational priorities by number of mentions (n=31).

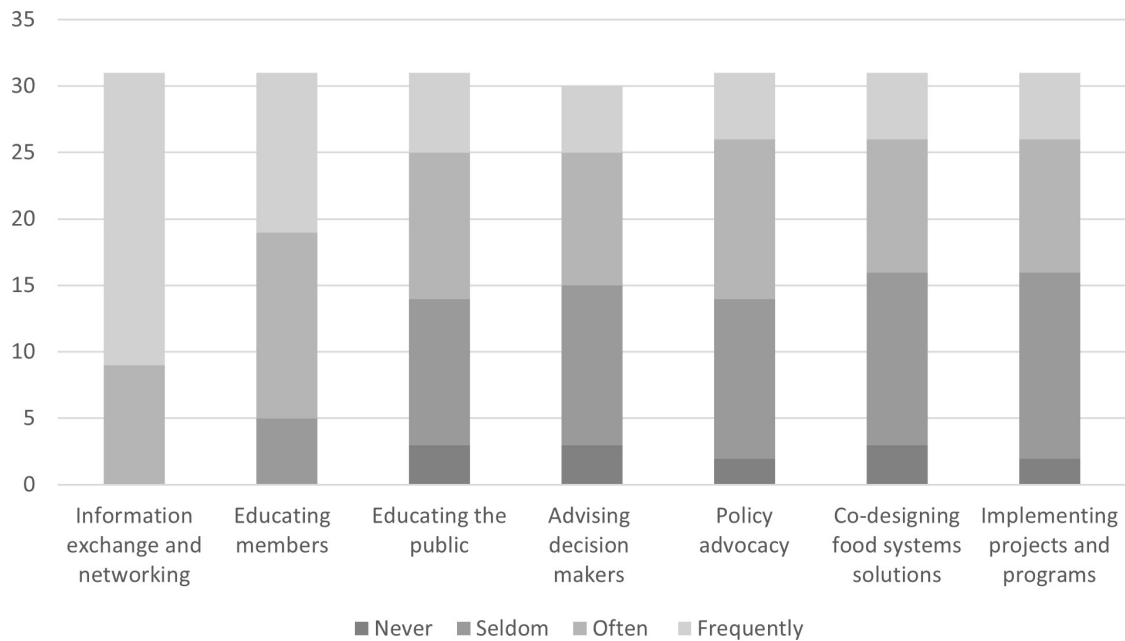


Figure 2. Frequency of participation in community engagement activities.

“networking” (12, 39%), and “research and data collection” (10, 32%).

Another survey question asked about the frequency with which the FPC participated in a variety of listed community engagement activities. As shown in Figure 2, information exchange and networking are the top activities, followed by educating members. Almost half of FPCs reported they seldom or never engage in policy advocacy.

Achievements and Challenges

In open-ended questions, we asked respondents to describe their greatest achievements and greatest challenges. Responses were thematically coded, and Tables 1 and 2 present the most common themes. Most FPCs listed tangible project, program, or policy successes as their greatest achievements. Projects ranged from conducting food system assessments, to educating the community about food system topics through forums and events, to creating resources that meet community needs. Most policy successes mentioned involved local-level achievements, but a few councils have assisted in passage or implementation of state policies. Other achievements listed included organizational development milestones, such as creating organizational structures, developing governance documents, and securing funding. Finally, some respondents conveyed that information sharing had improved interorganizational collaboration and/or their facilitation of emergent policy development by creating spaces for policy-makers and advocates to share ideas.

FPC challenges mentioned by respondents were coded into six identifiable themes. As shown in Table 2, respondents frequently mentioned organizational development challenges, particularly around finding funding to support staff and also around membership engagement.

POLICY PRIORITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

As shown in Figure 3, the most common policy priority identified by respondents is access to healthful food (labelled as “healthy food access” in the survey and table). There is a significant decrease in mentions of other priorities, including economic development and anti-hunger work, and the latter clearly overlaps with or complements access to healthful food. FPCs place comparatively less emphasis on food labor, transportation, and local food processing as policy priorities. Most policy work mentioned targets the local level, although many FPCs in California engage in state policy work via the California Food Policy Council.

Respondents mentioned a wide range of policy achievements, although they typically acknowledge that many other entities or individuals contributed to the result. Examples mentioned by respondents include inserting food and agriculture language into county general plans, establishing new land use policies supporting urban agriculture, passing backyard agriculture ordinances (e.g., chickens, bees), passing right-to-farm ordinances, and implementing good food purchasing policy.

Understanding Food Policy Councils: Lessons for Extension Partners

Table 1. Greatest Achievements by Frequency of Mentions (n=31)

Coded theme	Number of FPCs mentioning	Examples
Projects and programs	11	“Creation of two pilot program sites for food waste recycling/recovery”
Policy	8	“We saw the Urban Agriculture Incentive zones policy passed and implemented at the city level, alongside sweeping land use changes that expanded the potential for urban agriculture in multi-family residential areas as well as commercial and light industrial zones.”
Organizational development	7	“Developing sound meeting and communication practices as funding and staff support ended.”
Funding	4	“Secured additional city funding towards ending hunger”
Information sharing and networking	4	“Providing a venue for networking, information exchange, and relationship-building”
Introducing new ideas	3	“Reinitiated communication with key School District members to explore advances in the school nutrition services including consideration of a Good Food Purchasing Policy.”

Table 2. Greatest Challenges by Frequency of Mentions (n=31)

Coded theme	Number of FPCs mentioning	Examples
Funding or staff	11	“We do not have any dedicated funding or staff to keep the group moving.”
Membership engagement	11	“We are a volunteer organization, so available time of our coordinators and general membership is our greatest limitation.”
Organizational structure	4	“a lack of a strategic plan or clear, policy-related goals”
Developing projects and programs	4	“Developing food systems maps has been laborious and many have been discouraged by the lack of action while this process has been accomplished.”
Obtaining policy information	3	“We struggle to keep up-to-date on relevant state and federal legislation.”
Community engagement	1	“We are working hard to communicate and inform the public.”

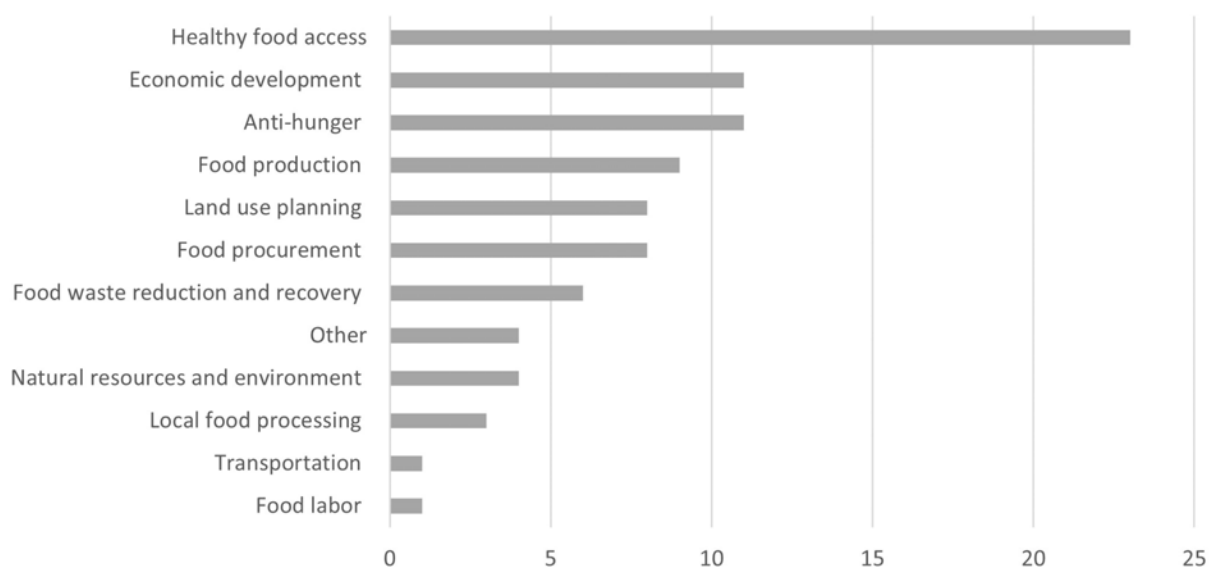


Figure 3. FPC policy priorities by frequency of mentions (n=31).

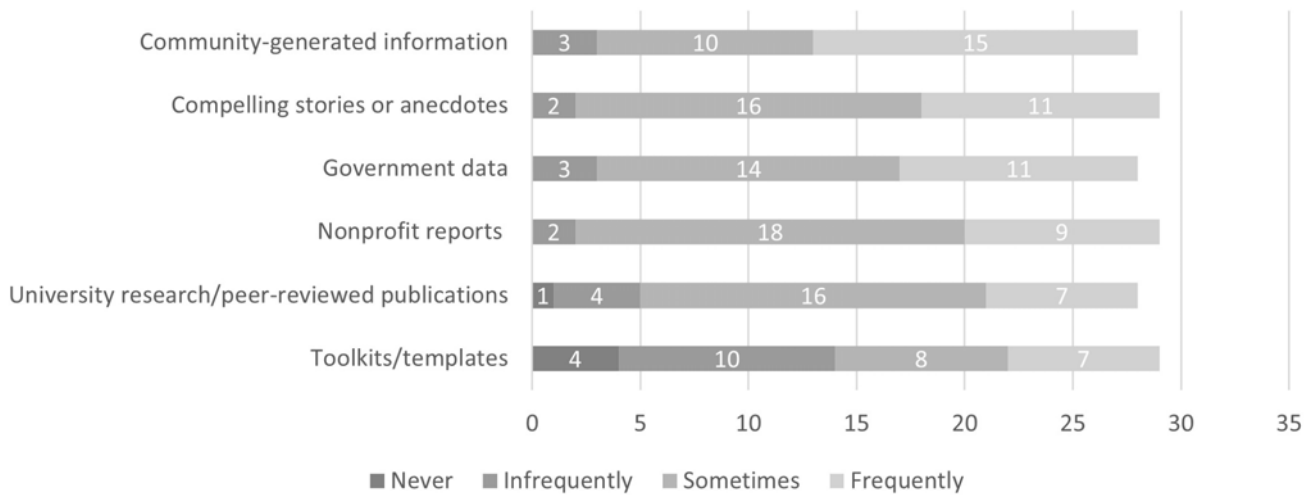


Figure 4. Frequency of using different types of information.

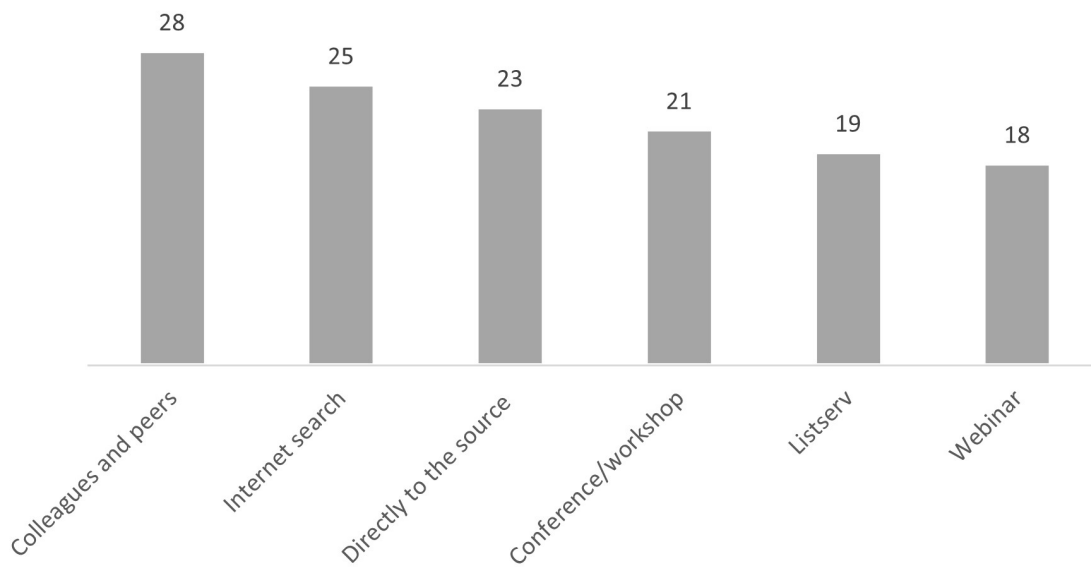


Figure 5. Number of FPCs using different sources of information (n=31).

USE OF RESEARCH AND OTHER INFORMATION

One objective of our research was to explore whether and to what extent California FPCs leverage research from the University of California and other sources, in hopes of improving the ways research and engaged policy work can be mutually supportive. The survey asked two closed-ended questions, one about a variety of types of information FPCs might use and the other about the sources of that information.

As depicted in Figures 4 and 5, FPCs rely comparatively less on university research studies and more on community-generated information, compelling stories, and government data (e.g., census data, food security measures, agricultural sales). The primary sources of information reported were local nonprofit organizations, colleagues, peers, and member organizations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our study was conducted among FPCs in California, and given the diversity of the United States, the findings may not be generalizable to different parts of the country. Despite this limitation, the survey results are useful, both in echoing what earlier studies have concluded regarding the organization and functions of food policy councils and in raising issues that Extension professionals need to consider as they explore FPC partnerships. We find California FPCs tend to have been formed relatively recently, operate with small budgets, locate themselves formally outside of government but with informal insider connections, and serve primarily as a “linktank” (Schiff, 2008) to foster relationships between various players within a regional food system.

Understanding Food Policy Councils: Lessons for Extension Partners

While diverse membership is also characteristic of prior findings, we were surprised to find 97% of councils reported having members from the food production sector. This stands in contrast to our case study research (Gupta et al., 2018a), in which interviewees indicated farmers (particularly commercial farm interests) were not well represented. It may be that survey respondents took a liberal view in defining “food production” by including home gardeners, urban agriculture initiatives, and other types of food producers not traditionally defined as “farmers,” or perhaps they took into account farmers who participated only sporadically. Whatever the reason, there appears to be an opportunity for Extension to help FPCs bring important commercial farming interests to the planning table.

Based on this case study research, the largest group around FPC tables in California are individuals and organizations working on access to healthful food or on reducing hunger, which is clearly reflected in the priority those goals have among the surveyed FPCs. As a practical matter, social service providers and government agency staff can attend FPC meetings as part of their paid employment, whereas farmers have to take time off to attend an FPC meeting. Not surprisingly, the ranks of FPC members often are weighted toward individuals representing public health agencies, food banks, and social justice groups, something obscured by the way the Johns Hopkins survey question on this topic is worded. Extension nutrition professionals are sometimes represented on FPCs and can play an important role in bringing research to bear on FPC discussions.

In our sample, FPC activities largely center on information exchange and networking among members, rather than direct policy work, a finding echoing previous research and one that aligns well with Extension’s mission (Schiff, 2008; Scherb et al., 2012). About half of respondents report “seldom” or “never” engaging in policy advocacy, which may mean that respondents conceived of policy work as strictly limited to advocating for or against certain pieces of legislation related to food. However, if we take an expanded view of policy work, we know from the case studies that FPCs frequently work on “upstream” and “downstream” policy dimensions. By “upstream” we mean efforts to raise awareness about certain food system issues (e.g., food insecurity) and thus set policy agendas, and by “downstream” we mean efforts to implement already enacted policies (e.g., an urban agriculture zoning bill). While they may not view it as policy work per se, FPCs often serve as a kind of incubator or think tank from which new policy ideas emerge and gain community visibility, or as a vehicle to ensure approved policies are implemented, or to hold elected officials accountable. Indeed, it is telling that when asked to report on achievements, respondents listed policy achievements (8) nearly as frequently as programmatic achievements (11).

Our survey was unique in that we asked specific questions about the types and sources of information that FPCs draw on to do their work. Given our interest in linking Extension research with outreach to FPCs, we found it important to learn that FPCs currently rely more on community-based knowledge than on academic research. This is supported by the case study findings in which FPC members assert that experiential or anecdotal data are often as compelling with policy-makers as statistics alone. FPCs also tend to rely heavily on colleagues and peers as primary sources of information, suggesting an opportunity for Extension professionals to lend their research-based expertise either as a member of a local FPC or as a trusted partner.

From the survey findings and as supported by our larger qualitative case study data, we identify several key takeaways for Extension professionals. These complement the tool kit offered by Fitzgerald and Morgan (2014), whose recommendations for Extension professionals focused on the stage of forming these councils. We find that once councils are established, Extension professionals can be helpful to FPCs by:

- translating and sharing relevant academic research, official data, or other systematically collected information to complement local knowledge sources;
- summarizing knowledge resources to help FPCs in making specific decisions;
- bringing a state-wide perspective that facilitates sharing of best practices;
- facilitating networking and information-sharing among FPCs by hosting regional gatherings;
- bringing farmer interests to the table, as well as those of any other missing interest groups;
- providing training on topics such as urban agriculture or food preservation;
- offering ongoing organizational and logistical support.

Readers seeking a fuller treatment examining how universities can partner with local food planning efforts can find an example in the Food Systems Planning and Healthy Communities Lab at the University of Buffalo (<http://foodsystemsplanning.ap.buffalo.edu/>) and recently published work about their activities (Whittaker et al., 2017).

By creating or deepening partnerships with food policy councils, local Extension offices and their partners can support the vitality of local and regional food systems. Drawing on its strengths in applied research, Extension can bring information to the partnership that helps FPCs focus their goals, enhance their programs, and strategize about how to best influence and change food and agricultural policies.

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