

## **Centre for Urban Health Initiatives Food Research Interest Group Mobilizing for Food Security and Health Research in Toronto Summary**

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To complete the CUHI seed grant researchers Charles Levkoe and Jennifer Reynolds attended the Food Secure Canada/Sécurité Alimentaire (FAC-SAC) Canada National Assembly "Reclaiming our food system: A call to action" from November 7-10, 2008 in Ottawa to gather information on challenges, successes and opportunities for policy development by community food security organizations four years after the initial *Mobilizing for Food Security and Health Research in Toronto* research (original findings presented at 3<sup>rd</sup> Food Security Canada Assembly in October 2005).

Revisiting the findings of the initial research in light of the rapid growth in the community food movement will help to identify the effectiveness of different strategies for organizations, networks and coalitions (including Food Secure Canada) towards policy development. Even as the food movement continues to grow from the grassroots, few inroads have been made around impacting policy at the municipal and provincial levels across Canada, and with practically no impact at the federal level. The food movement has not successfully moved beyond community level projects (neighbourhoods, target populations) in order to impact wider policy. There is an imperative for the movement to better understand how to advance policy agendas from its grassroots foundation. The success of specific community level programs however, presents an important opportunity. Through acting as pilots and sites for experimentation, the current challenge lies in their translation into universal public programs that can address a wider population and a broader set of goals.

### **Emerging themes**

The greatest successes in policy development can be observed at the municipal and provincial levels as well as within institutions. Gains at national level are more limited.

Some Recent Examples:

#### **Municipal**

- Creation of Vancouver Food Policy Council
- Toronto daycares to provide target percentage of local, healthy foods
- Ongoing success of Toronto Food Policy Council
- Regional Food Charters: Vancouver (2007), Prince Albert, Village of Kaslo (2008), Salmon Arm (2008), Saskatoon, Toronto, Durham Region, Sudbury)

#### **Provincial**

- Healthy Food In Schools Policy, Nova Scotia
- Manitoba Food Charter (Provincial Government is not yet a signatory)

#### **Institutions**

- University of Toronto food service to include percentage of food purchases to be local, sustainable in partnership with Local Food Plus
- Markham recently became first municipality in Canada to adopt Local Food Plus procurement practices for its municipal food services

#### **National**

- MP Olivia Chow's private member bill on Child and Student Nutrition

Policy development approaches for organizations and networks:

- ✚ **Empowerment** process to develop policy often as a secondary goal being used primarily as a tool for education and engagement. May or may not be policies that match “Inside game” strategic policy criteria (see description below)
- ✚ **“Inside game” strategic policy development:** Precision and knowledge of policy ask understand civil services realities, existing programs and regulatory instruments in the context of a willingness to provide information and legitimacy to civil servants in a useful, politically sensitive manner; variety of approaches to problems that address different issues (potentially overlapping) (Koc M et al, 2008)<sup>i</sup>
- ✚ Need to be open to diverse approaches to policy change that bring support and new energy – e.g. municipal beautification, employment

Ongoing challenges:

- To break free of cycle to access funding to enable community driven program development because support for planning, capacity and collaborative practices aren’t warranted without sufficient evidence in peer-reviewed literature or from program evaluation that demonstrates efficacy of programs in building food security. Many community-based initiatives but not consistent programs delivering service or dealing with the issues.
- Food system sustainability is a complex problem – again more research needed to identify the “problem” before action can be taken. For example, in the case of the Hunger Count non-profits are doing research and information is used by government, academics, non-profit organization.
- Communicating successes of grassroots food programs to federal government (Agricultural Policy Framework process did not have local food initiatives on the radar)
- Tension between ideologies in food movement (income vs sustainability often viewed as a zero sum game)
- Inside game can be challenging because food doesn’t have a clear department that the issue most affect
- Relationship building is key - ongoing communication with stakeholders; need to involve government from the outset and work with and develop champions; need public participation, which builds community ownership and builds on lived experience; also must build partnerships through networking
- There is a major focus on consumer power (e.g. organic labels, green products), which focuses primarily on the individual and can be isolating and limiting to a more inclusive and comprehensive democratic process

Recent Successes/New Opportunities:

- Many food initiatives have increased their ability to be community driven, inclusive – shift from client to citizen view
- Potential to grow initiatives to programs (example The Stop Community Food Centre’s Community Food Centre model) by bringing solutions not problems
- Using food to mobilize communities – Advocacy for a sustainable food system (e.g. a robust local food system, environmental sustainability) and alleviating poverty as a part of a more comprehensive approach
- Mobilize existing groups to work together (example environmental organization and food bank); facilitate through community health centres
- Co-operative business models for producers (marketing, distribution, retail) since profits can be re-invested into addressing barriers
- Food system sustainability shares agendas with health, environment (increasingly urgent issues)
- Helping to name root causes of issues (example: food deserts are planning issues; obesity is an urban issue (not just income but functioning of city institutions and services)
- Food movement has range of temporalities – e.g. planting seeds and harvesting vs. long-term struggle to achieve gains in other areas

## Discussion

In their recent article, Koc et al (2008) argue that the federal policy landscape is fundamentally altered with a diminished ability for the state to take action on complex issues (food is politically and programmatically complex, vast in scale, spread among many sectors that may face benefits or losses, and challenging to competencies of government) creating a greater opportunity for civil society approaches to shape policy. They identify opportunities to shift from a traditional focus on the parliamentary level to one focusing on interactions with middle and senior management and argue that the provision of high quality information, creativity, and analysis is a starting point.

- As identified in the initial research leaders of the food movement lack consensus on the best ways to achieve policy shifts at a national level or in working as a national coalition. FSC-SAC's steering committee suggested identifying focus areas for the coalition but the facilitated plenary session wrapping up the conference failed to identify these
- Identified in the initial research was that the lack of consensus of what food policy is and where it is made, has the potential to be both a strength and a weakness for the food movement. This appears to still hold true.
- Suggest that the lack of consensus stems from the limited awareness of FSC-SAC membership in "theories" of how policy has been effectively developed in Canada and still from a tension between stakeholders from different perspectives on how to balance priorities in first steps to create a sustainable food system (nutrition, anti-poverty, sustainable agriculture)
- Empowerment and "inside game" policy models are not essentially exclusive but Koc et. al. (2008) suggest that for FSC-SAC clearer definitions and a vision of how an entity that has little power to make policy can work most effectively are required.
- Suggest a path for FSC-SAC to utilize empowerment techniques but within a clearly defined "inside game" policy model which is arguably more effective given its success at the municipal and provincial levels to date for the food movement.

## Conclusion

There is an opportunity for further research into policy making and civil society organizational participation and to share results of research with planned FSC-SAC initiatives to conduct a national People's Food Policy Project (the first significant civil society collaboration to address food system inequities was the people's Food Commission in 1978). We suggest a need for a definition of policy shifting frameworks and a broad strategic plan for policy development (namely empowerment process to develop "inside game" strategic policies) in order to be effective. Lacking this the ongoing confusion of frameworks will continue to be a barrier in building consensus around food policy objectives and policy details.

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<sup>i</sup> Koc M, MacRae R, Desjardins E, Roberts W. Getting Civil About Food: The Interactions Between Civil Society and the State to Advance Sustainable Food Systems in Canada. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*. 2008; 3(2/3):122-144.