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Civil society engagement in food systems governance in Canada: Experiences, gaps, and possibilities

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Abstract

Civil society organizations (CSOs) commonly experience food systems governance as imposed by governments from the top down and as unduly influenced by a small group of private sector actors that hold disproportionate power. This uneven influence significantly impacts the activities and relationships that determine the nature and orientation of food systems. In contrast, some CSOs have sought to establish participatory governance structures that are more democratic, accessible, collaborative, and rooted in social and environmental justice. Our research seeks to better understand the experiences of CSOs across the food systems governance landscape and critically analyze the successes, challenges, and future opportunities for establishing collaborative governance processes

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with the goal of building healthier, sustainable, and more equitable food systems. This paper presents findings from a survey of CSOs in Canada to identify who is involved in this work, key policy priorities, and opportunities and limitations experienced. Following the survey, we conducted interviews with a broad cross-section of CSO representatives to deepen our understanding of experiences engaging with food systems governance. Our findings suggest that what food systems governance is, how it is experienced, and what more participatory structures might look like are part of an emergent and contested debate. We argue for increased scholarly attention to the ways that proponents of place-based initiatives engage in participatory approaches to food systems governance, examining both current and future possibilities. We conclude by identifying five key gaps in food systems governance that require additional focus and study: (1) Describing the myriad meanings of participatory food systems governance; (2) Learning from food movement histories; (3) Deepening meaningful Indigenous–settler relationships; (4) Addressing food systems labor issues; and (5) Considering participatory food systems governance in the context of COVID-19.

Keywords
Civil Society, Canada, COVID-19, Pandemic, Food Movements, Food Systems, Governance, Indigenous-Settler Relationships, Labor

Introduction

In September 2021, the United Nations held a Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) as part of a broader effort toward achieving its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. The UNFSS brought together food systems leaders from across the globe to work towards a healthier, more sustainable, and more equitable food system. Promotional materials proclaimed the gathering a "summit for everyone everywhere—a people's summit."[1] Despite the progressive discourse used throughout the event and the investment from public, private, and nonprofit sectors, many people and groups at the front lines of food systems work denounced the summit. Proponents within food sovereignty movements, academics, and representatives from civil society organizations (CSO) contended that powerful states along with corporate and philanthropic interests had co-opted the UNFSS. More specifically, they identified the lack of transparency and accountability, limited focus on human rights and issues of gender and social justice, appropriation of civil society narratives and Indigenous knowledge, and top-down processes that usurped established democratic processes such as the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (Canfield, Anderson et al., 2021; Canfield, Duncan et al., 2021; Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism, 2021). They described the UNFSS as a governance failure and criticized the flawed assumption that simply bringing people to the table through multistakeholder processes would result in broad engagement and participation.

While past food summits were led by countries willing to engage in collective decision-making, the UNFSS included transnational companies and corporate philanthropic organizations without clear rules of engagement, thus shifting power dynamics and the balance of influence (Chandrasekaran et al., 2021; Clapp et al., 2021; Montenegro, 2021). The unanswered criticisms resulted in a boycott led by more than 500 CSO members of the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism along with hundreds of food systems researchers and educators from across the globe (Agroecology Research-Action Coalition, 2021; Food Systems 4 People, 2021).

The debates surrounding the UNFSS highlight the need for more focused attention from researchers and practitioners on questions of power in relation to civil society engagement in food systems governance (Andrée et al., 2019; Duncan & Claeys, 2018). Food systems governance is commonly experienced by CSOs as imposed top-down by governments and unduly influenced by a small group of private sector actors that hold a disproportionate amount of power (Arthur et al., 2022; Clapp, 2020; Koç et al., 2008). This uneven influence significantly impacts the activities and relationships that determine the nature and orientation of food systems. In contrast, CSOs have sought to

[1] For details of the United Nations Food Systems Summit, see https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/about.

establish governance structures that are more democratic, accessible, collaborative, and rooted in social and environmental justice (Andrée et al., 2019; Hammelman et al., 2020).

Our research seeks to better understand the experiences of CSOs across the food systems governance landscape and critically analyze the successes, challenges, and future opportunities for establishing collaborative governance processes with the goal of building healthier, more equitable, and sustainable food systems. We adopt a food systems lens that considers not only supply chains (how food is produced/harvested, processed, distributed, consumed, and disposed of), but also the myriad ways that supply chains impact and are impacted by food security and nutrition, producer and harvester livelihoods, labor rights, Indigenous self-determination, economic development, equity and social inclusion, culture, urban–rural linkages, and environmental concerns (Tansey & Worsley, 1995). A food systems approach recognizes that these components do not operate in a vacuum but influence and shape one another. It also recognizes the impact of historical and ongoing oppressions such as the institutions of white supremacy, patriarchy, and settler colonialism in shaping the dominant food system (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Cadieux & Slocum, 2015). The food systems lens examines governance—the broad range of policies, laws, regulations, and de facto practices that shape and influence the nature and orientation of our food systems (Clark et al., 2021; Kennedy & Liljeblad, 2017; Kugelberg et al., 2021). Governance involves both explicit rules and implicit practices, customs, and assumptions related to *who* and *what* is considered part of a food system, who should be included in governance decisions, and in what ways.

Our research considers the role of CSOs in food systems governance in Canada and the opportunities for more collaborative forms of governance. Established in 2019, our project brings together a group of scholars from Lakehead University, Carleton University, and Saint Paul University alongside community partners who directly focus on food systems governance: Food Secure Canada/Réseau pour une alimentation durable (FSC/RAD), Plenty Canada, the Food Communities Network/Réseau Communautés Nourricières (FCN/RCN), and Sustain Ontario: The Alliance for Healthy Food and Farming. This paper summarizes findings from two years of research, pointing to central insights from our exploratory work and suggesting future directions for scholarship. Considering the dearth of research about participatory food systems governance in Canada, we conducted a national survey of CSOs to understand who is involved in this work, major policy priorities, and significant opportunities and limitations. Following the survey, we conducted interviews with a broad cross-section of CSOs to deepen our understanding of their experiences engaging with food systems governance. Our findings suggest that what food systems governance is, how it is experienced, and what more participatory structures might look like are part of an emergent and contested debate. We argue for increased scholarly attention to the ways that proponents of place-based initiatives engage in participatory approaches to food systems governance, examining both current and future possibilities. We conclude by identifying five key gaps in food systems governance that require additional study.

Research Context

Over the past two decades, CSOs in Canada involved in food systems-related work have had significant successes, evident in the exponential growth of place-based initiatives addressing local needs and supporting people and groups across the food chain. Studies have documented the achievements of a wide range of initiatives operating across scales and sectors such as community gardens and farmers markets, food access projects, sustainable agriculture initiatives, school food programs, and environmental health and food justice campaigns (Blay-Palmer, 2016; Knezevic et al., 2017; Miller, 2008; Wittman et al., 2011). CSOs have increasingly connected with each other to augment their reach and impact (Constance et al., 2014; Goodman et al., 2012; Levkoe, 2014). Research indicates how the food system lies at the nexus of pressing issues facing Canadians, including food insecurity (Council of Canadian Academies, 2014; Tarasuk et al., 2013), the climate crisis (Schnitter & Berry, 2019; Vermeulen et al., 2012),

diet-related disease (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, 2010), farmer attrition and farmland loss (Beaulieu, 2015; Miller, 2016), and declining biodiversity (International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems , 2016). In the face of these complex challenges, CSOs that understand these issues both practically and theoretically have much to contribute to food systems governance-related issues.

The growing literature on food systems governance and participation provides insights into the developments and gaps in current debates. Food systems today are governed primarily through neoliberal market-based structures with power concentrated in the hands of a small number of large corporate firms and wealthy governments (Clapp, 2021). Through control of the governance landscape, elite actors tend to orient decision making towards efficiency and profit rather than food provisioning and sustainability. Recognizing these challenges, a wide range of CSOs across sectors and scales seek to advance alternative forms of governance rooted in equity and the right to food (Andrée et al., 2019; Burnett, 2014; Lang et al., 2009). These actors aim to prioritize the needs of small-scale farmers, workers across the food chain, and those most negatively impacted by the dominant food system. For example, Desmarais et al. (2017) examine the limitations of current political–economic structures and the possibilities of integrating issues of justice and sustainability with state laws, policies, and programs. In a review of the scholarly literature, Arthur et al. (2022) identify the need to consider multiple perspectives of how food systems are governed to address complex global challenges. Likewise, Andrée et al. (2019) argue that CSOs take advantage of a wide range of structures (e.g., multistakeholderism, co-governance, and self-governance) in their engagement with the state. Several scholars note that understanding food systems governance requires analysis of the different actors involved, their relationships with each other, and their engagement with critical issues (Arthur et al. 2022; Moragues-Faus, 2020).

Increasingly, civil society actors actively engage in food systems governance work in diverse ways. This evolution toward more direct and sustained engagement with the state and industry bodies has proven promising on many fronts, and scholars are more fully recognizing inclusion of CSO representatives as fundamental to deliberative democracy and the realization of healthier, more equitable, and more sustainable food systems (Andrée et al., 2014; Desmarais et al., 2017; Koç et al., 2008). Many scholars have recognized the value of civil society engagement in governance and the knowledge and experience that social movements bring to realizing democratic processes (Andrée et al., 2019; Kooiman, 2003; Minnery, 2007). Both collaborative and confrontational, CSO engagement in governance activities has focused not only on offering potent critiques outside formal government relations but also on serving as agents of systemic reform (Clark et al., 2021; Desmarais et al., 2017; Renting et al., 2012).

A review of CSO activities since the late 1970s in Canada illustrates the enhanced engagement in governance processes. The People's Food Commission (PFC) represents one of the first collaborative efforts that brought together CSOs using a food systems approach. Established in 1977, this grassroots initiative organized hearings across Canada to collect testimony from Canadians on the state of the dominant food system. In its final report, *The Land of Milk and Money*, the PFC explicitly situated itself outside of the state and identified the impacts of corporate and elite power imbalances on food systems decision making (People's Food Commission, 1980). In 2001, a national gathering of food systems scholars and practitioners in Toronto expressed greater openness to working with the government. Bringing together 150 farmers and representatives from nonprofit and community organizations and government agencies, the group discussed plans to increase Canada's commitment to food security both domestically and abroad (Koç & MacRae, 2001). Food Secure Canada/Réseau pour une alimentation durable (FSC/RAD),[2] a national-level social movement network

[2] FSC/RAD describes itself as a "pan-Canadian alliance of organizations and individuals working together to advance food security and food sovereignty through three interlocking goals: zero hunger, healthy and safe food, and sustainable food systems" (FSC/RAD, 2018).

organization, was born at this workshop. In 2008, FSC/RAD played a central role in establishing the People's Food Policy (PFP) project, culminating in an influential report that laid out key policy principles for a food system rooted in food sovereignty (People's Food Policy, 2011). In contrast to the PFC, the PFP had more targeted goals of engaging and influencing the federal government and other decision makers (Levkoe & Sheedy, 2017; Martin & Andrée, 2017). Following the PFP report, and facilitated in large part by FSC/RAD, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (UNSRRF) conducted a Mission to Canada, the first to a country in the global north (United Nations General Assembly, 2012).

CSOs have played a significant and decisive role in ongoing efforts to establish a national food policy, including participation in the formal government consultation process launched in May 2017 (Levkoe & Wilson, 2019). Parallel to these efforts, FSC/RAD also played a leadership role in bringing together an emerging collaboration of actors from across the food systems calling for a national food policy council. Through the establishment of the Ad Hoc Working Group for Food Policy Governance, a wide range of food and agricultural groups, CSOs, and industry actors called for a mechanism through which the government would "proactively engage with these diverse stakeholders to provide ongoing input into the implementation of *A Food Policy for Canada*" (Ad Hoc Working Group for Food Policy Governance, 2017, p. 4). Following the Government of Canada's launch of the country's first Food Policy for Canada (FP4C) in 2019, the efforts by food and agricultural groups, CSOs, and industry actors contributed to the establishment of a new advisory body to the Minister of Agriculture in 2021, the Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2021; Andrée et al., 2021).

At the regional level, food policy groups (FPGs) have grown in number and scope over the past decade (Blay-Palmer, 2009; Levkoe et al., 2021; Mendes, 2008). FPGs are place-based organizations that rely on members situated across a wide range of sectors and issue areas to come together through a food systems approach that involves a range of social and environmental factors. FPGs include food systems actors across the food chain such as networks of residents, nonprofit organizations, small businesses, and public sector representatives. They generally aim to provide an integrated approach to municipal and regional food systems policies, programs, and planning and to facilitate participatory governance mechanisms (Schiff, 2008; Schiff et al., 2022). For many FPGs, diverse partnerships are a primary element of their success (Ilieva, 2016). For example, studies have demonstrated that relationships with government leaders and peri-governmental sectors (e.g., public health) are especially valuable in increasing legitimacy and supporting policy-related objectives (Bassarab et al., 2019; Gupta et al., 2018). A scan of grey literature of food policy councils by the Coalition for Healthy School Food and Food Communities Network/Réseau Communautés Nourricières in 2021 indicates about 111 FPGs exist across Canada, including food policy councils, food systems alliances, food strategy tables, and neighborhood initiatives (FCN-RCN, 2021a). To connect these FPGs with Indigenous and settler governance tables, FCN-RCN emerged in 2020 with the goal of sharing "ideas, knowledge, tools, and experiences around building food resiliency and decreasing food insecurity, networking a wide diversity of communities coast-to-coast-to-coast, in both French and English" (FCN-RCN, 2021b).

Methods

This paper explores the ways that CSOs across Canada actively engage in food systems governance and construct more participatory forms of governance. To better understand this emerging community of practice, we conducted a Canada-wide survey in both French and English targeted at CSOs. The survey ran from November 2019 to March 2020 and was distributed online through several national and regional listservs and sent directly to individuals at relevant organizations known to the research team. It explored different kinds of food systems governance efforts across different scales, issues, and types of organizations involved. The survey targeted CSO representatives with the following characteristics: (1) mandates that involved building healthy, equitable, and sustainable food systems; (2) direct involvement in food

systems governance[3] work at the regional or national level; (3) familiarity with the CSO operations and decision-making responsibility (e.g., Executive Directors, Program Managers, etc.). We collected a total of 69 complete responses.

Next, we undertook 65 interviews with leaders from CSOs active on an array of food systems issues between June 2020 and February 2022. To identify interview participants, we drew on a sample of survey respondents (i.e., individuals who had completed the survey or were named as important contacts by survey respondents) or individuals that were known to have been actively involved in important historical moments in the development of food systems governance initiatives in Canada. The sample population was intended to include a diverse representation across geographies, scales of work, and organizational types. Interviews averaged 60 minutes in length and used a semi-structured interview guide. They were transcribed verbatim and coded thematically using NVivo software. This paper focuses on the survey results and does not report in detail on the interviews, which we draw on to further explain and add perspectives on the major themes emerging from the survey.

Findings

This section identifies key findings from the national participatory food systems governance survey. It delineates CSO involvement in food systems governance broadly and national initiatives more specifically. In addition, we present respondent perspectives on the benefits and limitations of engagement in governance, and their current policy priorities.

Involvement in Food Systems Governance

The findings provided an overview of an emerging network of CSOs involved in food systems governance initiatives across Canada. Of the 69 responding CSOs, 42 organizations are located in Ontario (including three Indigenous, seven national, and two international), 16 in Quebec (including five national), three in Nova Scotia, two in Alberta, and one organization in each of the provinces of British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, New Brunswick, and in Yukon, and in Northwest Territories. The survey asked respondents for details about the CSOs they represent and other organizations they collaborate with as part of their food systems governance work. Based on respondents ($N = 69$) and CSOs named by respondents ($N = 153$), the majority of CSOs involved in food systems governance came from the nonprofit sector (53%). Other categories included representatives from food policy councils (15%), small business and agricultural associations (16%), research organizations (6%), Indigenous organizations (4%), and other professional associations (6%). The CSO representatives that responded focused their efforts evenly at the municipal/regional level (36%), the provincial/territorial level (35%), and the national level (26%), with far fewer focused at the international level (3%).

Over 90% of respondents indicated that they had been in frequent contact with other organizations in the nonprofit sector with respect to their food systems governance work. Responses regarding contact with various levels of government and the private sector varied widely. Over 70% of respondents stated that they "rarely" or "never" contacted institutions working at the global scale.

The survey also asked respondents about their primary areas of work. The most common areas identified included food systems (42%), agriculture (40%), community food access (40%), community development (36%), education (30%), health (25%), and research (23%). Far fewer respondents were involved with Indigenous-related initiatives (11%), fishing (4%), and labor (4%).

[3] In the survey, we describe food systems governance as the "relationships, rules, practices, and structures through which power and control are exercised and decisions are made within food systems. Food systems governance goes beyond singular issues to engage with food as relational, that is, as an aspect of life that connects us deeply as individuals, communities, and cultures. This includes not only how food is produced/harvested, processed, distributed, and consumed but also urban-rural linkages, food security and nutrition, producer and harvester livelihoods, Indigenous self-determination, economic development, equity and social inclusion, and environmental and ecosystem services. This might involve working directly to change or create policies and decision-making structures, as well as educating or coordinating with others who are involved in governance-related initiatives in various sectors and/or fields."

Engagement with Food Systems Governance Initiatives

To understand the degree to which respondents had been involved in food systems governance initiatives, the survey asked respondents about their level of involvement in four previous major initiatives at the national scale in Canada: the PFC (1977–1980), the PFP (2008–2011), the visit by the UNSRRF (2012), and the consultations and other activities leading up to the 2019 FP4C. We selected these four initiatives, discussed previously, as they represent key moments of food system activism at the national level during which many organizations from across sectors came together to address food systems governance. These initiatives also gained significant media attention and direct support from food movement networks such as FSC/RAD. These events demonstrated that various food systems actors could work collaboratively to build capacity and create change in decision-making processes.

While 50% of respondents reported a significant level of participation in the most recent FP4C consultations and activities, far fewer had been involved in the previous initiatives. Only four respondents indicated involvement in the PFC, 13 respondents indicated active involvement in the PFP, and 13 indicated active involvement in the UNSRRF visit to Canada. Of note, many respondents commented that their organizations did not exist at the time that the first three initiatives occurred (PFC, PFP, UNSRRF) and nearly 25% commented that they did not know what the PFC or the PFP initiatives were.

In addition to the past national initiatives, respondents offered 104 examples of other food systems governance initiatives they were engaged with across different scales, with relatively even distribution: 31 initiatives at the municipal level, 25 at the provincial level, 36 at the national level, and 12 at multiple scales (including initiatives named more than once). Table 1 gives an overview of some of the most prominent initiatives. We organized them into four categories based on the type and whether it was led by the government or CSOs.

Overall, the findings suggest that respondents interpreted food systems governance quite broadly. In some cases, respondents listed initiatives that could be seen as only tangentially related to policy making or traditional understandings of governance, such as education initiatives and convening networks. Similarly, many of the initiatives identified do not necessarily adopt a food systems approach, but rather advance specific areas or ele-

Table 1. Sample Initiatives Named by Respondents

Government-led Consultations	CSO-led Consultations	CSO-led Campaigns	Ongoing Initiatives and Collaborations (led by CSO)
• Organic Value Chain Roundtable • Seed Sector Roundtable • Food policy forums organized by municipal and provincial governments • Greenbelt Plan • Meat Industry Engagement Panel • Quebec Organic Policy • Safe Food for Canadians Act Consultations • Ontario Poverty Reduction Plan • Canada Food Guide • Procurement Policies • Ontario Food and Nutrition Strategy • Healthy Eating Strategy	• Local Food and Farm Coops regional roundtables • Inquiry on Genetically Modified Foods • Regional farmer's market policy	• Eat Think Vote (2015 national election campaign) • Vote ON Food (provincial and municipal election campaign) • Flocking Options Campaign (campaign to influence provincial poultry policy)	• Eastern Ontario First Nations Working Group • Coalition for Healthy School Food • Coalition to Ban Terminator Seeds in Canada • Municipal food policy groups • Food strategies and charters

ments of a food system. It is also worth noting that most governance initiatives listed fell into the category of government-led consultations, in which respondents had been solicited, directly or indirectly, for input for a particular policy or regulation at the state or peri-state level. This is consistent with observations that much existing food systems governance is led by state actors (Andrée et al., 2019).

Benefits and Limitations of CSO Engagement in Food Systems Governance

Beyond describing the nature of CSO engagement in food systems governance, the survey asked respondents to comment on benefits and limitations of increasing engagement in food systems governance activities at the national scale. We focused on national-level governance to get a sense of broader scale coalitions and efforts. Nearly all respondents (over 90%) believed CSOs should be more engaged in national-level food systems governance, but they also identified challenges to this work. Most respondents pointed to limited capacity and lack of meaningful opportunities for engagement in national-level policy processes as the crucial reasons for difficulty in engaging more deeply. One respondent noted that food systems governance and policy work is extremely complex, and thus time-consuming and resource-intensive. Respondents also noted limited CSO capacity to engage in governance-related work due to lack of explicit funding for this work. Others noted that CSOs often focus too closely on one issue, and therefore do not fully understand the broader issues and context well enough to adequately engage in governance. This is an important observation about food systems governance specifically, as it requires an understanding of the connections and relationships between actors, not just a single issue. One respondent pointed to the lack of coordination among organizations active on food issues, noting that CSOs that do get involved are often forced to act on their own with little support. Several respondents discussed how government decision making, especially national-level policy, is often heavily influenced by powerful corporate lobbyists or dominated by those advocating for trade, making it very challenging for CSOs to engage in those conversations. One respondent noted that national-level governance spaces typically exclude regional-level CSOs, "donc nous devons nous battre pour y participer et y être invité [so we must fight to participate and be invited]." These sentiments are particularly interesting considering that the survey data highlights that CSOs seek to engage in food systems governance at multiple scales, not just the scale at which most of their work takes place.

Throughout the survey, in various ways, respondents described governance concerns as complex problems that require collective efforts to address across sectors. Specifically, several respondents noted that it is necessary to come to terms with Canada's settler–colonial history, to actively address the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission[4] and work with Indigenous Peoples to achieve food sovereignty. Despite these challenges, respondents emphasized the creative and collaborative approach CSOs bring to food systems governance work, offering solutions rooted in on-the-ground experience that other actors or stakeholders may not possess. CSOs also drive change by building power in communities closest to the issues and working with local people and other organizations to create political will, clarity, and urgency for action at multiple scales. Perceiving CSOs to be rooted in place and in relationships with individuals and communities, numerous respondents commented that CSOs are uniquely positioned to bring the concerns of those most affected by the issues into policy realms, as many work closely with and/or serve individuals who do not typically have a voice in governance. One respondent noted, "We are frequently not supported to play this role, but it is an essential function in terms of capacity-building, convening, and working to generate creative solutions."

Policy Priorities

Finally, the survey provided insight into the policy priorities of respondents. From a list of 15 prominent policy areas, respondents identified the top

[4] Details about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission can be found at https://www.trc.ca

three priorities with which their organization was most engaged. The most prominent policy areas (over 25%) included improving and strengthening healthy food access, Indigenous food systems, local food procurement, and natural resources and the environment. The next group of top priorities (20%–25%) included school food programs, anti-hunger/anti-poverty efforts, food production, and economic development. Notably, there was much less engagement (5%) in areas including food labor. (See Appendix A for a full list of the 15 policy areas.)

Looking more closely at the top policy priorities in relation to scale, the majority were at the municipal level (e.g., healthy food access) and at the provincial–territorial level (e.g., school food programs). As with other findings in the survey, some respondents commented that limited capacity and lack of meaningful opportunities for engagement made it difficult to participate beyond the municipal level.

Analyzing relationships between the identified policy priorities, we found indications of sectoral siloing. For example, none of the respondents who listed agriculture as one of their primary areas of work listed anti-hunger/anti-poverty activity or Indigenous food sovereignty as a policy priority. We also found that respondents who listed food systems as a primary area of organizational work proved much less likely on average to identify food labor and Indigenous food sovereignty as policy priorities.

Themes for Deeper Exploration and Future Research

The survey findings provide a valuable scan that serves as a springboard for further analysis of who is involved in food systems governance in Canada, what areas they focus their energies on, and what scales they work at. In this section, we reflect on the findings and draw on the interview data to help interpret the relevance of these results for our research participants—the civil society actors who regularly engage in governance processes. We also present this information with the hope that other researchers will continue to explore the food systems governance landscape more deeply, through interviews and case studies with relevant actors.

Reflecting on the survey results, the scholarly literature, and discussions with our research team and community partners, we identified five key gaps in food systems governance that require additional focus and study: (1) describing the myriad meanings of participatory food systems governance; (2) learning from food movement histories; (3) deepening meaningful Indigenous–settler relationships; (4) addressing food systems labor issues; (5) considering participatory food systems governance in the COVID-19 context. Some of these themes emerged as notable absences in the survey data (e.g., descriptions of food systems governance, labor, food movement histories), while others were explicitly named by respondents as important areas in need of further attention (e.g., Indigenous–settler relationships). Our interviews took place between the first and fourth waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada, and the related public health measures, restrictions, and social and economic impacts on food systems generated an additional theme for further research. This section explores these five themes, drawing from quotes from our interview data to illustrate their importance to respondents and CSO engagement in food systems governance more broadly. We acknowledge that these themes are not exhaustive but share them to contribute to the broader conversations surrounding food systems governance.

(1) Describing the Meaning of Participatory Food Systems Governance

The survey results offer a snapshot of civil society perspectives on food systems governance in Canada. Upon reflection, they uncovered significantly more engagement in food systems governance than we had originally expected. Perhaps relatedly, we also encountered quite a range of perspectives on what food systems governance means to our informants, in addition to what deep participation in this work *could* and/or *should* look like.

In the interviews, we provided respondents with a broad definition of participatory food systems governance to consider (see footnote 3). This definition implies participatory approaches to governance that seek to include a diversity of voices in decision-making processes, particularly those directly implicated in and affected by the outcome.

In practice, participatory food systems governance includes various forms of multistakeholder governance, co-governance, and self-governance models (Clark et al., 2021). After offering this definition, we asked our informants what participatory food systems governance meant for them. Reflecting on the responses, we recognize that we will need to keep refining our own understandings, and not assume that "participatory" is how most CSOs experience the food systems governance processes they seek to influence or build.

For example, a respondent from an organization that works on farm labor issues in Canada noted that food systems governance, as they experience it, tends to be fairly one-sided. It is not a shared endeavour, with opportunities for broad engagement by all relevant actors: "Food systems governance is … all tied to the interests of growers. It's all about the produce being more important than the people behind it than workers behind it, because you know the people that are important are. … Canadian farming families." Consistent with this perspective that decisions tend to be influenced disproportionately by some actors more than others, a representative of a farmer organization noted that, in their work, food systems governance implies doing a "power analysis of food policies" to determine "who has power and how that power is wielded, distributed and so on" and "whose interests are they serving?"

In contrast to these perspectives, another interviewee emphasized that food systems governance is about the "balancing act" and integrative "thread" among various interests and priorities in policymaking:

> Where do we have policy? We have an environmental policy that's to protect the environment, we have a food safety policy to protect the health of humans. We have labor policy to make sure that we're not abusing the people who are working. So governance is that thread between these three things, that are central to how we can thrive as a society. That thread can improve the way things are, or it could stifle the way things are. If it's too much in favor of business, then the environment and social aspects get missed. If it's too much on the environment, then it becomes a barrier to growth of the businesses. So really, governance, if you want to talk about governance, it's a balancing act. What's good and what's right and what's going to work to help make everyone move forward.

These quotes illustrate that understandings of food systems governance and what participation in that process could mean depend on positionality, as well as organizational values and priorities. In the next phase of our research, we move away from predetermining our own definition of participatory food systems governance to unpack the multiple meaning(s) of participatory food systems governance for various types of CSOs in Canada. However, while many CSOs state that collaborative governance is a goal, the survey found that most respondents had been involved primarily in consultations rather than decision making. This begs the question of how "participatory" food systems governance processes—as defined by the actors involved in them—work in practice. Not every organization and its staff have the skillset, resources, and capacity to sit at governance tables, especially at the national level. Addressing these gaps is essential for food systems governance to be accountable to more diverse constituencies and their priorities, and to ensure that those who wish to engage in participatory governance have the opportunity to do so.

Future research will explore how participants understand and engage in a spectrum of food systems governance initiatives, with special attention to potential trade-offs, limitations, and paradoxes between governance goals and the political, economic, and environmental circumstances associated with various types of engagement. In the next phase of our research, we will undertake case studies of specific collaborative governance processes. Ultimately, our research aims to cultivate and amplify participatory forms of food systems governance by exploring the lessons learned from those actors who are actively involved in them.

(2) Learning from Food Movement Histories

While many CSOs claim to address food systems transformation through a variety of initiatives,

most focus on specific issues in particular places. However, there have been key moments when civil society actors have come together to scale-up their place-based work to address policy and governance across sectors. While a few of our informants carry a long institutional memory that goes back to the PFC in the 1970s, we found that overall, there was little in the way of sustained engagement in food systems governance over time. Many respondents represented organizations that have only been established in the past five to ten years and had not been involved in major national-level initiatives. As many CSOs have relatively high levels of staff turnover, the relative newness of many CSO staffers is reflected in the interview data. For example, an interviewee representing one of the newer organizations in Quebec told us:

> It [the organization] was founded in 2013. It's certain that during the first few years, we were more at the level of making very definite demands in relation to specific needs and issues. … Now, we have taken the time to see how things are going, and where the knots that prevent us from taking more space are. … Now … we are more in the process of making proposals on governance and on more macro aspects.

This quote resonates closely with the experiences of proponents from many of the organizations established in the last decade. It reveals how some organizations getting involved in specific food systems issues (e.g., providing emergency food) begin to think about the issues in a more systematic way and start getting involved in broader governance issues. These sentiments also show the importance of historical insight which representatives of such organizations may not always have. Overall, this finding affirms the need to document the history and achievements of CSOs active in food systems work so that the latest generation of actors can learn from those who came before.

Moving forward, our research seeks to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the historical engagement of CSOs in food systems governance at the national level. While there is a long history of CSO engagement in food systems governance, there is a lack of continuity of involvement, so that many respondents were unaware of this history. There are important lessons to be learned from previous pivotal moments that can help to inform, and hopefully strengthen, emerging models of participatory food systems governance. Future research could explore the ways that actors advancing place-based initiatives have worked collectively to engage in and advocate for participatory food systems governance, historically and today.

(3) Deepening Meaningful Indigenous–Settler Relationships

Greater emphasis should be placed on meaningful Indigenous–settler relationships as an important part of collaborative food systems governance that speaks to the treaty context and ongoing reality of settler colonialism in Canada (Kepkiewicz & Rotz, 2018; Manuel & Derrickson, 2021). To put it bluntly, working on food systems issues in Canada demands confronting and addressing issues of settler colonialism and Indigenous self-determination. Despite this acknowledgment and interest, the survey found only limited action in this regard. However, several respondents identified themselves as working collaboratively with Indigenous and settler CSOs and communities on food systems governance initiatives. As an example, one respondent noted that their CSO recently started an "Indigenous advisory circle" to directly advise the executive director "a few times a year": "That space is meant to be like, are we on the right track? What are we missing? What do we need to be doing?" This advisory circle led to the hiring of a staff position to support Indigenous-led food initiatives. The organization has also started to do more "public-facing statements and things around solidarity with Indigenous land defenders in our area."

Another interviewee spoke about how their organization was approached by local First Nations for some training, only to discover that these communities were already undertaking a variety of food initiatives. This encounter led to a new inspiring partnership:

> So, then my mind completely switched. Then we'd say, how do you do, we want to learn

> from you, and by the way, we'd like to share the expertise we acquired over time. And what really was a winner with Indigenous communities was the right to food because they are very sensitive to that, the values that we [i.e., our organization] carry, democracy, equity, respect, these are values that are very dear to them.

As another example of recent actions taken, a respondent from an organization that primarily works on international food issues noted:

> We've been doing a lot of thinking and work in terms of what is our role as social justice activists here in Canada? What can we do and what's an appropriate role for us? … We have an Indigenous person that's on our board. We'd like to recruit another one. That's in our plans. We've created our own Indigenous Rights Action Plan after the huge process of reconciliation [the TRC]. So, at the end you've got all these recommendations, but often they're directed to the government, but they don't tell Canadian citizens what we can do. So, we read the report and came up with our own list of actions that we want to do as [an organization] as a way to advance reconciliation.

Our future research will continue to explore what CSOs are doing to address the Canadian treaty context and reconciliation, including the barriers and challenges of those settler organizations struggling with and/or not currently engaging with Indigenous-led groups. We will also explore promising examples of settler allies working collaboratively with Indigenous peoples on governance within and beyond food systems. As we conduct case studies, we will also investigate opportunities for Indigenous food sovereignty in settler states as well as models of Indigenous governance. There is much to be learned about different perspectives and approaches toward governance that could be shared and possibly adapted.

(4) Addressing Food Systems Labor Issues

Labor concerns are central to food systems, yet the survey and interviews suggest they are relatively absent in food systems governance spaces and the work of food systems CSOs in general. For a few of the respondents, labor justice was salient. For example, a representative of an organization that seeks to get more fresh food into hospitals commented:

> We are not going to find that a solution is marvelous if it is cost-efficient but exploits people. And that's an element, and then a brake that will add to our many, many functions and actions to transform the system. But I have a problem with the fact that the only way to make hospital production profitable is to exploit people in a vegetable peeling factory. So, we never exclude this dimension [of labor justice].

We heard that many organizations want to do more on this front. A representative of a farm organization said, "The last ten years has really shifted the labor discussion from moving from unpaid internships to paying the employees [on farms] …" They also noted the growing interest in critical discussion of the role of migrant workers on their members' farms:

> We haven't been very involved in discussions around migrant workers and seasonal workers. … That came up at our conference this year. We did a panel on racial justice and agriculture, and how can you talk about racial justice and agriculture, without talking about all the migrant workers who grow most of our food? … [But] it's still a question for me about how can [our organization] engage in that space. … It is something that we should be more intentionally a part of.

Similarly, a respondent from an organization that promotes child nutrition noted that these are issues they want to engage in more actively:

> I think it's time for us to address [migrant labor issues] in a more systematic way. But it raises, of course, the question of the price of food and is very complicated, as we build alliances with the farm organizations, because of

> all their issues around migrant workers. … So again, that would be a place where I might have a view that I'd like us to do this work, but I don't think there's consensus [among our] members that this is our issue, yet.

As our research moves forward, we will continue to probe the intersection between food and labor issues. Future research could explore how governance issues related to labor might be addressed in food circles, and conversely, how food systems issues might be addressed in labor circles (e.g., migrant labor governance discussions, collective bargaining, the minimum wage). Currently, it appears that governance questions about labor across the food chain are predominantly taken up with labor governance more broadly, as opposed to food systems governance. There are many labor actors involved in labor governance spaces that include food workers/labor; however, few of them responded to our survey.

(5) Considering Participatory Food Systems Governance in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

As noted above, the survey was completed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and our interviews took place between the first and fourth wave of cases in Canada in 2021. This timing has led us to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted food systems governance, and the lessons we might obtain about food systems governance from this global challenge.

The onset of the pandemic in early 2020 highlighted the vulnerabilization[5] of essential workers at multiple points across the food chain (e.g., farm and retail workers) as well as the disproportionate impact on individuals and communities already in poverty. For example, while communities across the country already faced major food insecurity (Statistics Canada, 2020), this precarity increased significantly among those facing the highest levels of inequity. Moreover, fresh, and culturally appropriate foods became increasingly challenging for many to access (Klassen & Murphy, 2020). This brought to the fore the need for greater action for food systems governance. Community-based organizations responded quickly to augment local productive capacity (e.g., offering access to land, soil, and seeds to vulnerable groups; marshaling private food processing capacity to provide meals vis-à-vis the charitable sector) and to lobby municipal and provincial governments to maintain critical aspects of community-based food systems (e.g., ensuring farmers' markets and community gardens were deemed essential and could remain open, with enforced physical distancing and appropriate safety protocols).

Organizations also seemed to be working together in new ways through the crisis. One interviewee noted, "as a result of COVID a kind of cooperative came together quite ad hoc…trying to show how food could be the answer for resilience and coming back from COVID." An important question is how and why forms of cooperation evolved, and if they will continue to grow as we move through new phases of the pandemic, and beyond. The pandemic has also led to higher level governance conversations. One respondent noted,

> Now, with all the discussions around recovery and resiliency, it seems that everyone is ready to make big changes. There's kind of a need to set up new ideas, new systems, and everything and so we are very requested, we participate a lot in those discussions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the acute need for the voices of those most vulnerabilized to be better represented in food systems governance decisions (e.g., migrant farm and factory workers, retail employees, individuals living in poverty, Black and Indigenous people who are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity). Addressing these issues now and integrating lessons from the pandemic might help to mitigate the next one. As one interviewee noted,

> A lot of communities have had food security as a major priority issue, and have had a lot of

[5] Although cumbersome, this term has become used in some activist communities. It aims to identify the fact that people/communities are not inherently vulnerable, but rather, are *made* vulnerable by dominant social structures.

> work underway, but I think just going through this experience [of the COVID-19 pandemic] has made it much more front of mind for people and I think a lot of the projects and that might have been initiated over the short term as COVID response, may become more important.

Our future research aims to unpack these experiences within interviews and case studies—to broadly consider how food governance models were relevant in the pandemic and to explore specific possibilities for participatory food systems governance to mitigate ongoing inequities in food systems and create greater resilience to potential stressors through engagement.

To address some of the areas for further research identified in this section, our research team is now methodically coding the interviews we undertook from 2020 to 2022. In addition, we are planning a series of case studies of promising participatory food governance examples. We aim to bring forward insights from each example, and to determine the governance mechanisms and relationships that allow CSOs to break down the silos that treat food systems issues as isolated from one another. Our analysis will also consider overarching issues of power (e.g., who is included/excluded, why, and to what effect?) and privilege (e.g., race, class, gender, settler), and advance both critiques and positive examples with respect to innovative models. Our research will also consider what resources and supports must be put in place to ensure participation in food systems governance by CSO representatives.

Conclusions

Drawing primarily on national survey results, we delineated CSO involvement in food systems governance within Canada. We outlined the benefits and limitations of engagement from the perspective of these CSOs, and identified their policy priorities. We also pointed to the roles CSOs play in ground-truthing, driving change, imparting the urgent nature of the challenges, bridging policy and people, including vulnerabilized people and communities, collaborating across sectors, and advocating for systems change.

Based on the survey results, the scholarly literature, and reflections from the research team and our community partners, we suggested five themes that deserve greater attention and illustrated why these areas of focus matter to CSOs. First, we explored the meanings, possibilities, and limitations of participatory food systems governance from the perspective of food systems actors who engage in these governance experiments. As researchers, we may have a theoretical sense of the possibilities and value of such processes, but what this looks like on the ground can be quite different. Second, we noted the value of documenting historical engagements to raise awareness of how food systems and CSOs have evolved. Such work could inform the present-day leaders of Canadian food movements, who may not know about activities from a decade and more ago. Third, we identified the need to investigate what CSOs are doing to deepen meaningful Indigenous–settler relationships in Canada's treaty context and reconciliation efforts. Fourth, we suggested the need to focus attention on the nexus between food and labor issues, and the extent to which organizations working in these spaces are linking these issues. Fifth, we encouraged deeper examination of how the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped food systems governance, including how more participatory and collaborative approaches mitigate ongoing inequities in food systems and create greater resilience. While these findings have particular relevance to Canada, insights from this research might also contribute to wider discussions on public participation in food systems governance at regional, national, international, and global levels.

As a preliminary study, the data collected in the surveys and interviews are an important step in understanding the ways that CSOs are engaged in food systems governance across Canada. As most of the respondents were located in Ontario and Quebec, the data likely presented a somewhat narrow picture of the current governance landscape. Further research will focus more attention on CSOs in other provinces and territories.

As we continue this research and share these stories, we should also seek to develop a typology of the different civil society actors involved in food systems work. Clark et al. (2021) refer to food

movements as the "networks of people, groups, and organizations that are challenging industrial food systems by experimenting with a variety of alternative ways of producing, harvesting, foraging, processing, distributing, consuming, and, ultimately, governing food" (p. 175). These movements, and the diverse initiatives they spearhead, are associated with a range of labels, including fair trade, civic agriculture, food justice, food sovereignty, agroecology, slow food, and community food security. Given this broad definition of food movements, it would be tempting to believe that all the CSOs we interviewed are part of such movements. While it may be true that most respondents align with goals such as social justice, sustainability, and healthy food, they do not all envision the same pathways for achieving those goals; ultimately, some are more comfortable with making small changes to the industrial food system while others aim to transform it completely.

Our research brings to the fore a diverse constituency of different kinds of organizations associated with food systems work, some that might ascribe to the food movement label and others that might not. Moreover, it is important to critically interrogate the role of CSOs as vehicles for participation with social movement groups that have less formalized structures and access to resources While CSOs can enhance the engagement of diverse communities in food systems governance efforts, it is not clear that they adequately facilitate involvement of those most affected by current policies and regulations, nor that they have the will or ability to advocate for more radical changes. Moving forward, we will continue to unpack these distinctions and the perceptions of participatory food systems governance held by representatives of the different types of organizations involved in this work.

As food systems research moves forward on these topics and others, it will be important to develop an integrated understanding of how issues such as the environment and economy and elements of systems such as production and consumption are interconnected and mutually constitutive. This might involve working directly to change or create policies and decision-making structures, as well as capacity-building activities for those involved in, or affected by, governance initiatives. Ultimately, food systems governance must go beyond singular issues to engage with food not only in the material sense, but also as an essential element of all life—connecting us as individuals, communities, and cultures.

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Appendix A. List and Description of Policy Priorities

1. Food procurement (e.g., municipality, institutional or hospital)
2. Healthy food access (e.g., healthy food financing, food and nutrition incentives at farmers markets, soda tax, school wellness policies)
3. Food waste reduction and recovery (e.g., tax incentive for food donations, date labeling, food waste recycling)
4. Anti-hunger/anti-poverty (e.g., outreach and enrollment in social assistance programs, food banks, summer feeding programs, senior hunger, poverty reduction)
5. Land use planning (e.g., urban agriculture zoning, comprehensive planning, farmland protection)
6. Food production (e.g., farming, ranching, aquaculture, gardening, beekeeping)
7. Local food processing (e.g., cottage food industry, community kitchens, local slaughter)
8. Food labor (e.g., minimum wage standards, sick leave, working conditions)
9. Natural resources and environment (e.g., water, climate change, soil quality, pesticide regulation, seed and breed protection and development)
10. Economic development (e.g., branding initiatives, market development, food hubs, food business promotion, food and farm financing)
11. Transportation (e.g., access to healthy food retail, last-mile food distribution from wholesale suppliers to consumer food retailers)
12. School food programs
13. Strengthening Indigenous food systems
14. Fair Trade
15. Policy priorities not determined (only select if none of the above options selected)