

Big ambitions, modest beginnings: Civil society participation in food system governance in Australia

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Abstract

As social, environmental, climate change, and public health challenges mount, there is growing recognition that many of the roots of these contemporary crises are to be found in the nature and

trajectory of the dominant food and agricultural systems. Consequently, a growing number of Australian civil society organizations (CSOs) seek to engage in processes of food system governance to address concerns of health and wellbeing,

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sustainability, and resilience. This paper summarizes a case study that explored the characteristics, values, and activities of seven food-related CSOs and identified the factors that enable or hinder their work. The results revealed that while the ability of CSOs to influence food system governance has been modest to date, some progress is being made, particularly regarding food systems governance processes at the local government level, pointing to the possibility of more participatory forms of local food system governance developing.

Keywords

food systems, food policy, food governance, civil society organizations, funding, philanthropy

Introduction

There are growing calls for major shifts in local, national and global food systems, due to their widely acknowledged adverse impacts on both human health and the ecological integrity of industrialized, unsustainable models of food production, manufacture, sale, marketing, consumption, and disposal (Bradshaw et al., 2021; IPES-Food, 2017; Massy, 2017). The problem is complicated by the pronounced trend toward increasing concentrations of corporate power across most sectors of the food system following decades of neoliberalism¹ and financialization² (Howard, 2016; IPES-Food, 2017; Rose, 2021). Such concentrated economic power translates into effective political power in terms of influencing the direction and exercise of key decision-making across legislative, regulatory, fiscal, trade, environmental, and social policy domains in ways that privilege corporate profit over human and environmental health (Clapp, 2021; Kickbusch et al., 2016; Rose et al., 2022).

Achieving food systems transformation thus

unavoidably requires the capacity to engage in governance. Governance is defined as the “relationships, processes, rules, practices, and structures (both institutional and discursive) through which power and control are exercised and decisions are made” (Clark et al., 2021, p. 176) and enacted. Food system governance is a particularly complex exercise, generally involving decision-making by an interrelated web of actors that affect various subsections of the food system (Andrée et al., 2019a). Alongside local, state, and national governments (including their employees, and in some cases elected officers), these actors include food sector and other businesses, industry bodies, and CSO funders (usually philanthropic foundations and the program staff working within them who make decisions about awards of grants). Actors involved in food system governance increasingly include food movements, which are networks of people, groups and organizations with varied objectives such as fair trade, food sovereignty, and food democracy (Andrée et al., 2019a; Clark et al., 2021).

It is important to note that food systems governance takes place at different levels in Australia, and, as we explore in this paper, the opportunities for CSOs to be meaningfully involved vary according to the level of government in question. For example, in the context of health, in the State of Victoria, state legislation requires every local government to create a municipal health and well-being plan every four years, setting out the actions these plans will take to support better population health, which invariably involves consideration of access to healthy and affordable food. The development of these plans is an important arena of food system governance and an opportunity for CSOs to participate in and influence the decision-making process. However, significant budgetary allocations are needed for meaningful actions and

¹ “Neoliberalism is ... a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. ... It holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market” (Harvey 2005, pp. 2–3).

² “Financialization” is used here to describe significant transformations in national and global economies since the late 1970s that have produced numerous negative consequences, in particular growing inequality within and between nations and regions. The term formally refers to “the increasing role of financial motives, financial markets, financial actors and financial institutions in domestic and international economies, societies, the environment and changing relationships between the financial sector and the real non-financial sector” (Sawyer, 2018, p. 44).

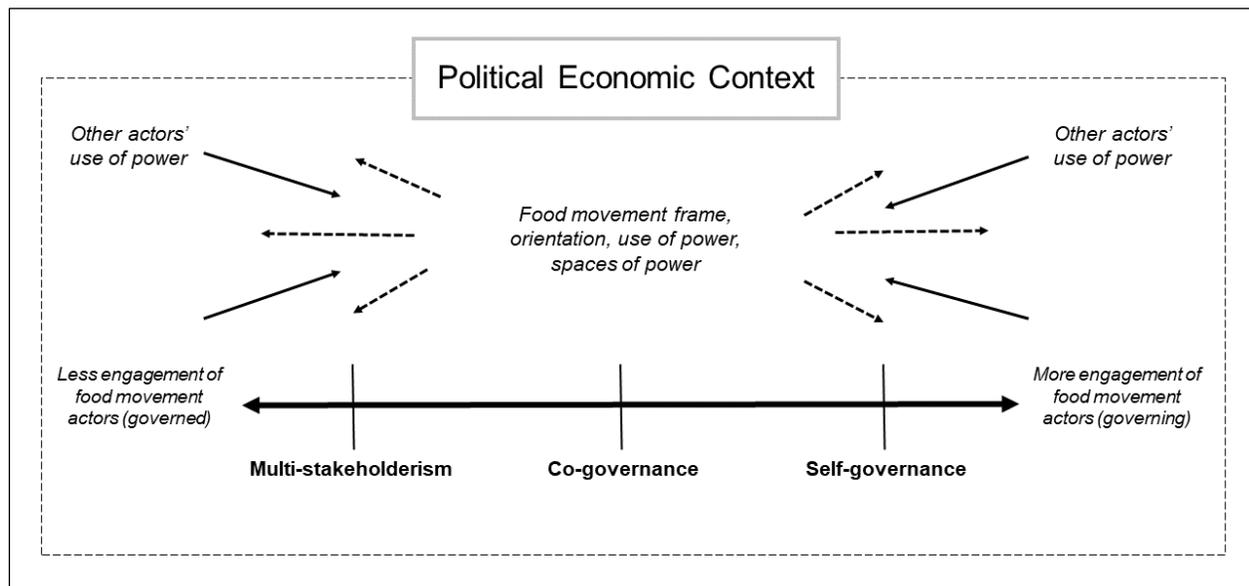
programs to expand affordable access to healthy food. State and federal governments determine the great majority of the funding available for these programs, and CSOs have little opportunity to engage in decision-making about such matters at those levels. Other dimensions of food system governance relating to health include labelling, marketing, and pricing of healthy and unhealthy foods. Here, decision-making takes place at the federal level and is heavily influenced by large multinational food corporations and their representatives (Slater et al., 2024), with few opportunities for CSOs to engage in any substantive way.

An extensive scholarship has developed theoretical tools for understanding how power is exercised in food system governance. Clapp and Fuchs (2009) refer to three distinct forms of power: *instrumental*, *discursive*, and *structural*. *Instrumental power* refers to the direct influence one actor has over others and is typically mobilized by resources owned and/or controlled by the actor and its ability to access decision-makers. *Discursive power* manifests from the ability of an actor to frame issues

and narratives. This facet of power is intimately associated with political legitimacy (Fuchs & Kalfagianni, 2009), since power accrues when other parties trust the validity of the message. Building knowledge, reputation, and credibility contributes to an organization’s ability to frame food system issues, develop narratives for ways to address these issues, and establish new norms in sectors or the community (Reinsborough & Canning, 2010). Finally, *structural power* is the power to influence governance decision-making spaces by setting agendas and defining institutional decision-making structures (Clapp, 2021).

Andrée, Clark, Levkoe, Lowitt, and Johnston (2019b) propose a *food governance continuum* to theorize “the ways that food movements [and their constituent organizations, individuals and initiatives] mobilize resources to disrupt, influence and/or engage in the execution of power through food system governance arrangements” (p. 30; see Figure 1). This theorization builds on interactive governance theory³ (Kooiman et al., 2008) and draws on the above theories of power to analyze

Figure 1. Governance Engagement Continuum: The Role of Food Movements



Source: Clark et al., 2021, p. 177.

³ Interactive governance theory is a field of study that has emerged since the early 2000s. It is based on the core concept of “interactive governance,” which one of the leading scholars, Jan Kooiman, defines as “the whole of interactions taken to solve societal problems and to create societal opportunities, including the formulation and application of principles that enable and control them” (Kooiman, & Bavinck, 2005, p. 17).

where organizations are located on the continuum. *Multistakeholderism* is a weak form of engagement and is characterised by CSOs, as one of many stakeholders, seeking to influence policy and the associated decision-making that constitutes the process of governance. State and/or market actors retain control of problem-setting, decision-making, public policy execution, and compliance enforcing. Other stakeholders may be consulted in policy development processes, but there is no guarantee that their interests will be integrated into the final policy outcome.

On the opposite end of the continuum is *polycentric governance* involving “social movement actors [including CSOs] participating in active governance of their own food system” (Andrée et al., 2019b, p. 30). Independent actors self-organize and agree to a mutual set of rules that aim to re-embed social and environmental concerns in food systems. In the middle is *co-governance*, which describes situations where governance roles are shared between state and nonstate actors. This form of governance is used to solve complex problems when state actors recognize that nonstate actors have resources and capacities to collaboratively work on addressing a problem.

There is a lack of research exploring the role, extent and nature of participation in governance processes related to the food system by CSOs in Australia. This paper presents the results of case study research conducted with seven Australian CSOs engaged in food system governance to varying degrees. The research sought to answer the following questions:

- How were the CSOs engaged in food system governance; that is, what form(s) did their engagement take?
- What motivated them to engage in food system governance?
- What factors enabled and/or constrained their engagement?
- What do they feel their work has achieved to date and what is the potential for its progress in the future?

These case studies form part of a broader multiyear research project investigating food system

governance at the local level (i.e., involving local governments [LGs] and CSOs) in Australia (Carrad, Aguirre-Bielschowsky et al., 2023). In particular, this paper builds on a survey of Australian food system CSOs that found that organizations were involved in a range of food system governance-related activities, but that their engagement predominantly took the form of *multistakeholderism* (Carrad, Smits et al., 2023). There were very few examples of *co-governance* identified by the survey, and none of *polycentric governance*. This supports the view that, other than at the discursive and grassroots levels (Sippel & Larder, 2021; Smith, 2023), CSOs in Australia have had relatively little influence or impact on food system policy and governance. This is in contrast with, for example, Canada, where CSOs and the food movement more generally have had a longer trajectory and more opportunities to participate in food system governance, including at the national level (Levkoe et al., 2023).

Method

Design

Using an explanatory multiple-case study methodology (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009), this study analyzed the characteristics, values, and activities of seven food-related CSOs and the factors that enabled or hindered their work. Using a multiple-case design and in-depth interviews allowed for the involvement of these organizations in food system governance to be explored in detail, while reflecting their diversity (Yin, 2009). The consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative case studies (COREQ) have been used to report the findings (Tong et al., 2007); see the Supplementary Material. The research was conducted by four interviewers (with a maximum of two for any given interview). All interviewers were female, with qualifications ranging from Honours (completing at the time of the study) to a Doctor of Philosophy.

Participants and Recruitment

A shortlist of 18 potential organizations was compiled by the research team based on the respondents to our prior survey (Carrad, Smits et al., 2023). Organizations were shortlisted according to key characteristics such as the location of the organiza-

tion, the organizational type (e.g., nongovernmental organization [NGO], social enterprise), its scope or level of work, primary activities and/or sectors, years of operation, and relationship with LG. Nine shortlisted organizations were invited and agreed to participate in the study; however, this paper only presents the results of seven case studies. The eighth, a First Nations–led organization, was not included in the reporting for this paper as the issues raised in its case study were so qualitatively distinct from the others that it requires separate and further analysis and reporting. The ninth revealed in the interview that they were engaged purely with operational activities and did not participate in food system governance at any level.

Using a nonprobabilistic, purposive sampling technique,⁴ a key person within the organization (e.g., president) was contacted with an invitation to participate and asked to identify any other relevant staff and/or board members who held knowledge relevant to the topic and objectives of this study. Participant numbers were thus a product of the number of nominated and consenting organizational members, resulting in a total of 16 participants in 11 interviews or focus groups (range: one to five people in each interview or focus group). Participants provided signed, informed consent prior to the interview or focus group.

Procedure

A semi-structured facilitator’s guide was used to conduct each interview or focus group (see the Supplementary Material). Questions explored the origins of the organization, its values, the role of the participants in the organizations, and the role of the organization in food system–related activities. Their understanding of ‘food system governance’ was explored, as was the rationale behind their organization’s participation in governance-related activities. Participants were also invited to discuss their connections with various stakeholder groups, the enablers of and barriers to their work, and the factors they perceived would strengthen their work. Online interviews or focus groups were

conducted between July 2021 and February 2022 and ranged between 36 and 103 minutes in duration. The interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, and each participant was sent a copy of the applicable transcript for their review and corrections prior to analysis. Participants gave permission to name their organization, although the identity of specific interviewees and focus group participants has been kept confidential. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Wollongong’s Health and Medical Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 2021/039).

Data Analysis

The transcripts were analyzed using thematic data analysis, based on the steps outlined by Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003). First, two authors (Carrad and Reeve) read the transcript of two interviews and focus groups to familiarize themselves with the data and note down initial impressions. Framing the analysis using the interview question guide, they then each independently coded the transcripts by inductively generating themes or subcategories under each of the (deductive) discussion questions. Using an iterative approach, one of these authors (Carrad) then coded all remaining nine transcripts in NVivo (QSR International, Version 12) based on a coding schema comprising major themes and subthemes, which were analysed to identify patterns and connections between them. Following the completion of the coding process, each major theme and any subthemes were interpreted by the second author (Reeve). Illustrative quotations to exemplify themes were noted.

Our analysis was framed by Andrée et al.’s (2019b) food governance continuum and the three factors they identify as influencing the execution of power within food system governance. These factors are *ideological* or *strategic direction* of the organization (its key objectives, priorities, underpinning philosophical approach to achieving its vision and governance, and leadership structure); *total instrumental resources* (internal factors that enable partici-

⁴ Nonprobabilistic purposive sampling refers to the nonrandomized selection of interviewees in quantitative or qualitative research, where the researchers are exercising their judgment in selecting a diverse and/or representative sample of individuals from a particular cohort of research subjects (Vehovar et al., 2016).

pation in food system governance, such as funding, reputation, legitimacy, and opportunities for engagement, i.e., its instrumental power (Clapps & Fuchs, 2009); and the broader *political-economic context*.

Some methods to achieve saturation, such as theoretical sampling, were not possible due to the relevance and ability of organizational members to answer the questions about food systems activities and governance (i.e., other members would not possess the requisite knowledge to provide meaningful insights). Despite this, code saturation is likely to have been reached (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2017; Saunders et al., 2018). When analyzing the final transcript, most of the data were categorised to existing codes, except for some issues uniquely specific to that organization in this sample.

Results

We begin by providing an overview of the participating organizations. Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of each of the organizations, including their formation, key internal actors and external stakeholders, and the activities they undertake in the food system. Next, we examine the organizations' food system governance activities across the three tiers of government (federal, state, and local), before proceeding to apply the food governance continuum framework to analyze these activities and their impact to date (also summarized in Table 1). While 'government' and 'governance' are not interchangeable (Gjaltema et al., 2020), CSOs' engagement with food system governance in Australia typically takes place within multistakeholder policy-making forums and processes created and/or enabled by local government; hence the bulk of our findings and discussion concern governance processes at this level. We conclude the results by examining barriers to and enablers of participation in food system governance for this cohort of CSOs.

Overview of Participating Organizations

The participating organizations loosely fall into three key categories based on their scale and the nature of their objectives: (1) regional food systems networks: Food Fairness Illawarra (FFI), Food For

All Latrobe Valley (FFA), and North East Local Food Action Group (NELFAG); (2) sector-specific national associations: Community Gardens Australia (CGA) and Young Farmers Connect (YFC); and (3) national and regional organizations working for broad system change: Sustain: The Australian Food Network (Sustain) and SA Urban Food Network (SAUFN).

While there was significant diversity across the CSOs, they shared many objectives for food system transformation and engaged in similar activities (see Table 1). Key objectives clustered around promoting ecologically sustainable, healthy, and fair food systems that support food security, positive social outcomes, and connection within communities. A core activity for all CSOs was creating networks and platforms for collaboration and for sharing knowledge and research. Other activities included running events; conducting or participating in research; working on or supporting local projects, initiatives, and programs; and advocating, advising, or engaging in discussions with various levels of government, the food relief sector, food retailers, and producers.

Most of the CSOs were formed in the wake of events that brought together various stakeholders to talk specifically about food system-related topics. Two (FFA and Sustain) had their roots in state government-funded health promotion programs. CGA and YFC formed because of identified gaps or barriers for community gardens and for first-generation farmers, respectively.

CSO Engagement with Food System Governance

CSOs engaged in food system governance by directly or indirectly attempting to influence various levels of government and/or other food system stakeholders.

Interviewees discussed how the federal government plays a key role in shaping the political context for food system governance at all levels of government in Australia. However, their interaction with the federal government was very limited, generally taking the form of submissions to national inquiries and consultations, and/or advocacy on specific issues, for example the use of community gardens during COVID-19 lockdowns.

Most CSOs had some level of engagement

Table 1. Summary of Participating Organizations

Participating organization	Role	Year formed and impetus for formation	Key Internal actors	Key stakeholders	Primary activities in the food system	Food governance-related activities	Type of governance engagement ^a
Community Gardens Australia CGA National	National representative body for and network of community gardeners.	1995 Recognized need for connection between community gardens to support and advocate for their existence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers • Community garden members • Ambassadors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local government • General public • NGO partners 	<p>Understand the needs of and support members.</p> <p>Create networks for collaboration and knowledge and resource sharing.</p> <p>Advocacy to LGs.</p>	<p>Influence (e.g., through lobbying councillors) local community garden policy.</p> <p>Build systems to improve public access to existing community gardens.</p>	Multistakeholderism
Sustain: The Australian Food Network National	National health charity operating as a “think and do’ network, specialising in designing and building sustainable & healthy food systems” (Sustain, n.d., para. 1).	2016 Continue the work of the Food Alliance, an organization established by Deakin University and funded by a state health agency, VicHealth, from 2009 to 2014.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University academics • Employees • Volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NGO partners • Local government • Targeted public interested in food system transformation 	<p>Perform research to inform food system reform and change.</p> <p>Undertaking paid consultancy (community engagement, research, policy and strategy development) for local and state government.</p> <p>Facilitate platform to connect LG actors.</p> <p>Develop projects and capacity building programs.</p> <p>Events and knowledge dissemination.</p> <p>Create capacity for other food system organizations.</p>	<p>Shape LG food system strategy development.</p> <p>Influence LG food system literacy and attitudes toward their role in local food systems.</p> <p>Build levels of food system literacy among residents and community organizations.</p> <p>Create opportunities for dialogic platforms.</p> <p>Advocate to local, state, and federal government on issues related to food system governance.</p>	Multistakeholderism with some engagement leaning toward co-governance.
Young Farmers Connect YFC National	National representational body cultivating networks, resources and community for first-generation farmers interested in local food economies, small-scale production, and regenerative/ ecological farming systems.	2018 Recognized challenges and lack of support for first-generation farmers and the need for peer support networks and resources nationally.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First-generation farmers • Volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local and state government • NGO Partners • University academics 	<p>Understand the needs of and support members.</p> <p>Create networks for collaboration and knowledge and resource sharing.</p> <p>Respond to local and state government consultations.</p>	<p>Help raise the profile of young farmers within government.</p> <p>Provide input into government policies.</p> <p>Advocate to government and business community.</p>	Multistakeholderism
Food Fairness Illawarra FFI INSW	Regional community coalition working toward a healthy, sustainable and fair system for the region.	2005 Conference about poverty and food insecurity in the state capital brought together regional actors who	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health agencies • Local governments • University 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General public • Community Groups • Charities • NGO 	<p>Create networks for collaboration and knowledge and resource sharing.</p> <p>Events, education and awareness raising.</p> <p>Develop and support local initiatives and programs.</p>	<p>Advocate to LGs against fast food development.</p> <p>Advocacy to government, business and food relief sector.</p> <p>Make representations and submissions seeking to</p>	<p>Elements of co-governance</p> <p>Limited by lack of government leadership within coalition</p>

		recognized a specific need. Inspired by similar coalition in state capital.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food relief sector 		Influence LG plans and strategies.	
Food For All Latrobe Valley FFA, Victoria	Regional community food security coalition working to increase access, availability, and consumption of fresh, nutritious food for everyone in the community.	2018 State government health initiative in response to a coal mine fire that impacted the health of the local community. Food security identified as an issue in the region.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health agencies (funded by state government) • Community groups • Community leaders • Local organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General public • Food relief sector 	Create network for collaboration and knowledge and resource sharing. Support local initiatives and programs to enact the action plan. Work with the food relief network to make it more efficient. Advocacy to LG and supermarkets	Develop and advocate for signatories of a regional food declaration.	Weak co-governance arrangement Limited by lack of government involvement in coalition
SA Urban Food Network SAUFN, South Australia	Regional platform for communication, sharing knowledge, resources, and case studies of local food system initiatives.	2016 Regional food system event highlighted the need for connection and communication with the sector.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental agency (funded by state government) • Volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local Government • NGOs • Health agencies • General public • State government agencies 	Create network for collaboration and knowledge and resource sharing. Capacity building in government and the general public. Events and awareness building,	Enabled R&D food system project across 4 LGAs that influenced food literacy and LG strategies and policies. Enabled LG community of practice on food systems.	Co-governance enabler
North East Local Food Action Group NELFAG, Victoria	Regional collaboration of people with a passion for improving the region's local food system.	2015 Regional food system event brought together many people and organizations that wanted to continue collaboration and work toward common goals in the region.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State-funded health, environment, and tourism agencies • Food co-operative • Local governments • Local food networks • Businesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General public • Local producers, food retailers, and hospitality • Local, state, and federal government representatives 	Regional food system discussion paper and strategy development (2018–2022). Creation of network for enacting the strategy that undertakes priority identification, collaboration, and knowledge and resource sharing. Support local initiatives and businesses working toward the strategy. Advocacy to all levels of government.	Regional food strategy development (developed solely by NELFAG).	Weak co-governance Lack of government involvement in coalition and recognition of strategy

^a This table is based on the authors' analysis of where most of the food governance activities carried out by the CSO sits on the food governance continuum (Andrée et al. 2019b), using the current data analysis and the authors' knowledge and experience of food system CSOs in Australia.

LG: local government; NGO: nongovernmental organization

with Australian state governments. For example, Sustain was one of several CSOs involved in the development of a statewide Consensus Statement on food system governance during 2021–22, *Towards a Healthy, Regenerative and Equitable Food System for Victoria* (Victorian Food Security and Food Systems Working Group, 2022), which sought to present a coherent agenda for substantive food system reform and governance. In 2022, Sustain, CGA and FFI were among 77 organizations and peak bodies that made submissions to a New South Wales (NSW) parliamentary inquiry into food production and supply.⁵ The content of their submissions was extensively referenced in the committee’s final report, which contained several recommendations, such as a statewide food systems plan for NSW and a food security and food systems council. If these and other similarly wide-ranging recommendations were adopted and implemented by the NSW government, this would result in a significant opening of food system governance in NSW to meaningful CSO participation.⁶

Local governments were perceived as the most accessible level of government by participants because, even with limited resources, a CSO could readily access LG elected officers (councillors) or employees. Also, CSOs were often invited to engage with LG policy-making processes. Interviewees identified that LGs have regulatory authority over key elements of the food system, often own and/or manage the land used by community gardens, develop plans and policies for their municipalities and (at times) regions, and have public visibility and reach. For these reasons, they were identified as a key point of influence in local-level food system governance.

CSOs sought to influence LG food system-related policies and policy-making processes both directly and indirectly. CSOs that had developed a reputation as a trusted partner or knowledge holder had been invited to participate in the development of food system strategies, policies, or plans, and in

some instances wrote them directly as consultants. CSOs provided other consultancy services to LG such as food system mapping and assessments, and evaluation of emergency food relief provision during COVID-19. Other direct attempts to influence LG policy-making included focused advocacy, ranging from conversations with LG councillors and employees, to making formal submissions on strategy development processes or on particular issues (e.g., food security and healthy food access, strengthening the local food system, and taking stronger action to address climate change). Advocacy and campaigning also took place in response to specific perceived threats, for example, the introduction of a community gardening policy that would be detrimental to many gardens.

Opportunities to indirectly influence local-level food system governance included networks and events, LG employee participation in a steering group facilitated by a CSO, and joint collaborations. These spaces fostered trusted relationships, enabled knowledge dissemination to LG employees, facilitated food system literacy, and inspired action. For example, FFI’s governance board included three positions for LG employee representatives, and FFI drew on these relationships to circulate best practice food system knowledge and enlist representatives to advocate internally to their fellow staff inside LGs for certain inclusions or changes to strategic planning and LG policies. SAUFN and Sustain both ran network events that engaged LG representatives, usually employees, although at times including councillors. Sustain facilitated an LG food system staff forum across three states that acted as a community of practice and peer-to-peer learning network. SAUFN’s events inspired the formation of a similar community of practice. SAUFN also sparked a joint collaborative project with LG employees to improve food system literacy, explore the role of LG in enabling community food system resilience through policies and programs, and create a food systems

⁵ A peak body in the Australian context refers to a “representative non-government organisation that provides information dissemination services, membership support, coordination, advocacy and representation, relevant research, [and] policy and sector development services for its members and other interested parties” (Australian Capital Territory [ACT] Government, n.d., p. 2).

⁶ The report of the Committee on Environment and Planning was delivered in November 2022 and can be accessed at the parliamentary website: <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/inquiries/Pages/inquiry-details.aspx?pk=2841>

toolbox to enable other LGs to engage in food system governance.

Key Factors Influencing CSO Engagement with Food System Governance

Three key aspects identified in the food system governance continuum framework (Andrée et al., 2019b; see also Figure 1) are explored below: *strategic direction* and *structure* of the organizations; factors enabling (or hindering) CSOs' *instrumental, discursive, and structural power* to engage in food system governance; and *external contextual factors* influencing spaces available for CSOs to engage with food system governance. Table 2 summarizes the continuum of strengths and challenges faced by the seven participating organizations that influence their instrumental, discursive, and structural power to engage in food system governance.

Strategic Direction

Two regional networks (FFI and FFA) had clear visions and steering groups that worked methodically to develop an annual plan or strategy to set goals, assign responsibilities, and clarify member expectations. Both networks shared a similar focus on food insecurity, given its high prevalence in the two regions. A third, NELFAG, developed the *North East Local Food Strategy 2018-2022* (Croft, 2019) by engaging a wide range of stakeholders, including state government-funded health, tourism and environment agencies, and LGs.

CGA worked with state and regional coordinators to engage directly with community gardens, understand the local political context, and advocate for local or state government changes. YFC brought together new farmers who shared the goals of ecologically sustainable small-scale farming and strong local food economies. YFC also recognized the need for government policy to support these goals.

SAUFN had a broad vision for healthy and sustainable food systems in South Australia but had not developed strategies or action plans. Its objective was to support and build on pre-existing activities in the regions by developing a platform for communication and knowledge-sharing. SAUFN thus acted as a key influencer and enabler for individual or collective food system action by strategi-

cally leveraging knowledge and connections from a national network and drawing on interstate examples to avoid “reinventing the wheel.”

Sustain similarly aimed to influence the policy and systemic environment for healthy food systems, specifically urban agriculture and LG food system capacity-building. Sustain took a multifaceted approach to food system transformation using three key action pillars: think, do, and network. This included research to build the evidence base to inform projects, advocacy activities and consulting advice, engaging in microlevel food system projects such as running a food justice farm, as well as organizing events to bring people together.

Building Instrumental Power

For participating CSOs, instrumental power could be found in the internal capacity of the organization and/or its external funders and supporters (Clark et al., 2021).

Staff and volunteers bring skills, knowledge, passion, leadership, and networks to an organization, and participants highlighted how critical their human resources were to their ability to influence food system governance processes and outcomes. All regional networks were supported by a paid coordinator through state government-funded health or environmental agencies. However, most CSOs operated through a mix of remunerated time, either directly funded by the CSO or via a partner agency, and voluntary labor, but with a heavy reliance on the latter. Participants said that the passion, vision, and interest of volunteer contributors drove the CSOs' strategic direction and operations and helped create or maintain external stakeholder relationships. Another critical enabler was individuals within CSOs who had pre-existing connections with other key food system actors (e.g., local councillors), and the motivation to build sustained relationships with the broader community. These connections created opportunities for collaboration and brought people and organizations together to work toward a common mission. Staff and volunteers with specific skills and knowledge, such as communication and web design, also enabled organizations to develop their capacity to engage a broader audience.

Most of the funding received by CSOs came

from philanthropic foundations, government grants, and (for the regional networks) state gov-

ernment-funded health agencies. One received funding through consulting to local and state gov-

Table 2. Continuum of Strengths and Challenges for Engagement in Food System Governance

Type of power	Theme	Strengths to work from	Challenges to overcome or navigate
Instrumental power	Internal capacity of organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passion and skills of staff and volunteers • Champions and leaders within the organization • Conflict resolution tools and capacity to enable collaboration between multiple parties • Intersectoral communication framework to provide effective and quick results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of internal staff or volunteer resources • Staff and partner burnout and turnover • Lack of internal organizational capacity to implement projects or administer the organization
	Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grant funding from trusts, foundations, local or state government, or government-funded agencies • Income from consulting to local and state government • State government-funded agencies contributing coordination, staff resources, or organizational backbone support • Pro-bono legal assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ineligibility for funding or being unsuccessful with grant applications • Available funding or compensation not commensurate to the task • Short-term, project-to-project funding
	Organizational governance, structure and culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear vision, goals, objectives, and responsibilities • Internal organizational capacity: experienced and capable board or management committee, sound internal governance with appropriate and up-to-date policies, organizational strategy with clear vision and mission, etc. • New organization or coalition formation enables flexibility to pursue interests without bureaucratic red tape 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties defining what the organization is and what it does. • Status-quo culture
Discursive power	Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data and evidence base • Internal research capabilities or relationships with universities • Expertise on specific matters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of data on specific issues
	Reputation and credibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrated “wins” and long-term sustainability of coalition and its partners • Accessible, professional, and easy-to-use website • Visibility of coalition or organization through projects and events • Developed reputation as subject matter experts • Transparency in engagement • Collective voice: volume of membership backing and/or wide range of partners enabling authority • Diversity of members or key contributors • Well-liked, fun, and/or knowledgeable public ambassadors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization not widely known • Lack of publicity or media • Lack of reputation and credibility
Structural power	Relationships / Partners / Alliance members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal commitment in partner organizations' strategic plans • Partners or alliance members have similar objectives and values • Working in partnership enables collective impact • Clarity of roles enabling good relationships • Relationships with local government • Established networks and connections to mobilize and connect communities • Two-way communication systems and feedback loops to filter knowledge, information, and resources out and community knowledge or opinions back into the organization • Time and openness to build relationships • Facilitating opportunities to network and collaborate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partners are poorly funded or lack capacity • Restrictions or red tape prevent full engagement with coalition or public endorsement of coalition-developed strategy • Collaboration challenges, e.g., lack of trust, interpersonal conflicts

ernment, nongovernmental organizations, and peak industry bodies. The national CSOs raised a small amount of funding through membership fees, but interviewees noted that charging high memberships fees would hamper participation by the people that the CSOs were trying to support (i.e., those on lower incomes). Other funding barriers discussed by participants included extensive unremunerated consultation time with a variety of stakeholders, as well as the nature of grant funding, which meant that most were narrowly focused on supporting stand-alone, short-term projects with easily quantifiable outcomes. The short-term nature of grant funding made it difficult for CSOs to fund core organizational capacity, conduct long-term strategic planning, and retain staff. One CSO felt that, because they had been established for a few years, funders overlooked their existing projects in favor of new organizations with fresh ideas:

[Philanthropic foundations often] like to fund flash, new things, and fancy organizations with brand new ideas, which means that we're often competing with organizations that don't have any demonstrated capacity, but because they're brand new, they're often more attractive to fund. (Interviewee 6)

This insightful comment highlights the extent to which program staff working in philanthropic foundations play a central role in expanding or constraining the capacity of CSOs to engage in processes of food system governance. These individuals, together with managers and employees in LGs and state government, act in some respects as the gatekeepers of the ability of CSOs to influence the current and future trajectory of food system governance in Australia.

Building Discursive Power

The data suggested that strong relationships facilitated discursive power in three ways: (1) promoting the organizational agenda through networks or voluntary ambassadors; (2) forging connections with universities or academics that contributed to organizations' knowledge and expertise; and (3) facilitating two-way communication system that disseminated knowledge, information, resources, and a

food system mindset to members or target communities, while filtering back community knowledge and opinions into the organization.

Participants cited knowledge and evidence as key enablers for advocacy, strengthening the organization's reputation, and encouraging or empowering members, the community, or government to act. CSOs generated knowledge by conducting surveys of their own members or the public, partnering with universities, contributing to academic research projects, using university student research projects to identify best practice, conducting evaluations of programs, and/or leveraging networks to learn from similar initiatives around Australia. Developing an evidence base for action on various food system issues was cited as making a significant difference when advocating to local and state government. For example, a YFC interviewee discussed how quantifying the economic contribution of small-scale farmers helped frame why governments should take the sector seriously. A YFC representative also spoke about developing baseline evidence as a starting point for program evaluation, while CGA interviewees discussed the importance of substantiating the benefits of gardening and developing baseline data on food insecurity and the volume of local food produced and consumed in a region.

CSOs' reputation and credibility were identified as key enablers to engaging with the wider community, and with local and state governments, as well as for securing funding. Developing a good track record of "wins," in terms of projects or advocacy outcomes, was important for gaining credibility with the wider community, demonstrating reliability to partners and stakeholders, and increasing the legitimacy of a research agenda. Four CSOs (Sustain, CGA, YFC, and FFI) had established themselves as knowledge experts on specific matters, which created opportunities for consultation with local and state governments and an industry peak body. The use of well liked and strategically aligned public figures was also a powerful way for one CSO (CGA) to enhance its reputation.

The collective voice of members, partners, and networks strengthened organizational credibility. NELFAG's regional food strategy included inputs and endorsement from a wide range of organiza-

tions, which helped to establish the strategy's authority when NELFAG approached government and potential stakeholders to seek support for the strategy's adoption and implementation. YFC's 400 financial members provided leverage for corporate sponsorship discounts and lobbying the federal government. FFI had activated its wider network to write submissions to the relevant LG, lobbying against the planned development of a fast-food restaurant chain near a new housing development. Conversely, challenges to building reputation and credibility included a lack of public clarity about what the organization does or who is behind it (in terms of funders) and a lack of engagement by members of the public not already interested in some aspect of the CSO's mission.

Building Structural Power

Since they generally do not have the power or resources to establish and maintain decision-making spaces themselves, CSOs typically can only exercise such power through relationships and collaborations. To build structural power, interviewees described their efforts in establishing and maintaining relationships with ambassadors, community groups, health services, nongovernmental organizations, universities, legal firms, businesses, and state and local governments.

CSOs identified a range of factors that enabled the formation and maintenance of relationships, including leveraging existing connections to 'get a foot in the door,' establishing a culture of working collaboratively rather than competitively, clarifying the role and expectations of partners from the beginning, and ensuring that contributions were mutually beneficial to the CSO and its members (see also Table 2). CSOs also identified strategies for developing relationships specifically with LG employees, including broadening the LG employees' mindsets about their role in food systems; leveraging areas of priority for LG (e.g., economic development) to appeal for LG contribution or participation; expressing an interest in engaging with LG employees by initiating conversations; demonstrating an understanding of LGs; and creating new spaces for engagement. However, several CSOs stressed the challenging nature of collaboration, with one commenting, "Collaboration is really

hard. It doesn't always work and it's very energy-intensive" (Interviewee 2).

To minimize the potential for conflict, interviewees stated that it was important to ensure that people feel welcome and heard in all meetings and engagements. Finally, the element of trust was noted as being foundational to successful collaborations: it was difficult to work collaboratively in the absence of a strong basis of trust between the organizations and individuals involved.

Contextual Factors

The final component of the food governance continuum framework involves the examination of contextual factors, with the Australian socio-political context identified as a key barrier for CSOs to engage effectively in food system governance. Interviewees identified the following issues: a lack of food system literacy (in both government and the wider community); a lack of substantive data about food system issues or subsectors; a gendered underappreciation of food and food systems in association with "women's work"; and associated ingrained cultural assumptions contributing to undervaluation of food systems as a priority area for government intervention. One interviewee commented that the overarching neoliberal philosophy in Australian politics has led to chronic underinvestment in health prevention, sustainability, and social justice.

The siloed nature of government operations in Australia at both the local and state government levels raised challenges for CSOs, given the interdisciplinary nature of food systems and the need for a whole-of-government approach (Parsons et al., 2018). Some CSOs found it difficult to identify who to talk to within a particular LG and found that often LGs did not approach food system issues using a whole-of-organization approach. Departments sometimes seemed to actively work against each other. Additionally, regulatory red tape, such as complex approval processes or restrictive planning regulations, were common challenges encountered by CSOs.

Participants described how different regions have differing priorities because of historical context, affecting their ability to undertake food system governance activities. For example, FFA

was located in a coal and manufacturing region and therefore agriculture had not been a governmental priority, with environmental and climate change topics being contentious issues. Further, it was clear from CSO interviews that the local political context varied widely across Australia. One interviewee, working with multiple LGs, said, “Sometimes they’re helpful partners, and other times either they’re maybe potentially obstructive or just don’t quite know what to do” (Interviewee 5).

Multiple regional networks also cited LG staff restructures and turnover as issues that required additional work to educate new staff, and which could slow or even halt participation in a project or initiative.

Discussion

This qualitative study of CSOs engaging in food system governance in Australia identified that, while nearly all organizations have ‘big missions’ that are congruent with the challenges faced by the contemporary Australian food system, progress to date in terms of influencing the priorities and policy directions of that system has been modest. That said, there are several promising, and in some cases surprising, signs at lower levels of governance (policy-making at the local and, in some instances, state level) of space opening for more inclusive, participatory, and democratic processes that may point toward a power shift over time. The harder governance realm to penetrate—and the most important one in terms of the locus of power in the Australian food system—is at the federal level, which still is largely a closed policy and governance space for CSOs.

The application of the food governance continuum framework (Andrée et al., 2019b) confirmed the findings of the previous CSO survey research (Carrad, Smits et al., 2023), namely that most of these CSOs engaged in multistakeholderism. This finding needs to be qualified in relation to paid consultancy work on food system strategy and policy development, discussed below. Our analysis extended the application of the governance continuum by exploring the factors influencing CSO engagement in food system governance, namely power and force (internal factors), strategic orientation, and external factors and context. This

analysis was further informed by examining the instrumental, discursive, and structural dimensions of power (Clapp et al., 2009). The findings identified that many CSOs have important strengths, especially regarding their knowledge, membership, volunteers and staff, experience, expertise, networks, and collaborations. These strengths have enabled the CSOs examined in this study to begin to build a measure of discursive power to shape food system thinking and framing. To date, however, this discursive power (which, by its nature, is almost impossible to quantify) has not translated into meaningful manifestations of instrumental or structural power in terms of significantly affecting food system governance processes and outcomes. Key barriers identified in the research included resourcing and financial constraints as well as the short-term, project-based nature of most available funding. In this respect, there is a clearly identified need for CSO leaders to engage with managers and staff in the philanthropic sector to explain the complex and long-term nature of systemic change and the according need to support CSOs to build their capacity to engage in the governance processes that shape the future direction of the food system itself.

Australian Political Context: What Spaces are Open to CSO Engagement?

Participants reported that local (and in a few instances, state) governments were receptive to, or supportive of, CSO engagement in food system governance. State governments indirectly resourced the regional networks and the Victorian Consensus Statement working group via funding to health and environmental agencies. This funding created spaces for collaboration among food system actors themselves, but opportunities for CSOs to engage directly with state government on food system governance appeared to be less common. Sustain and YFC were invited as trusted and capable knowledge-holders to engage with food system governance at the state level through paid consulting and advisory services, which can be framed as a form of co-governance.

LGs provided the greatest opportunity for engagement, although this varied widely depending on the local political context as well as the extent

of understanding among councillors and LG employees about the many ways in which food system issues affected key work areas such as climate change, population health, and sustainability. LGs provided open, visible, and structured opportunities for CSOs to engage in multistakeholderism through, for example, formal submissions to annual budgets and LG plans or strategies. CSOs were also able to access councillors and LG staff to advocate for changes in less formal and public settings.

Towards Co-governance

As noted, co-governance refers to “food movement actors sharing governance roles with other actors” (Andrée et al., 2019b, p. 31). Johnston and Andrée (2019) synthesised four key elements present in successful collaborative governance arrangements, as follows: (1) a driver for collaboration; (2) “quality principled engagement” sustained by “interactive processes of discovery, definition, deliberation, and determination” (p. 13); (3) a shared motivation fostered through quality interactions, trust, shared commitment and internal legitimacy; and (4) sustained reinforcement through “virtuous cycles” of engagement which result in institutional procedural norms, leadership, resources, and knowledge.

Based on this conceptualization, the case studies suggest that several CSOs are moving from multistakeholderism towards co-governance. The regional networks exhibited several components of the four elements outlined above but seemed to be affected by a lack of drive from LG partners (councillors and employees) to fully commit to food system change. FFA and NELFAG struggled to find alignment between LGs’ priorities and the objectives of their networks. For example, there tended to be a government focus on economic development (narrowly conceived) as being of higher importance than health and wellbeing or sustainability.

More Than Just Consultancy

CSOs providing paid consultancy services to local and state government can shape the food system governance landscape in important ways. Consultancy opportunities emerged when managers and

staff in a local or state government department recognized a gap in knowledge or a need for action in a policy area, and sought trusted and knowledgeable organizations to tender for research, community and stakeholder engagement, and/or policy and strategy development. The provision of such consultancy services enabled CSOs to exercise discursive power by shaping the framing of particular food system issues, providing recommendations to guide the future direction of food system policy, and, in some instances, writing the policy themselves. Sometimes, policy development was informed by community engagement based on methods informed by the principles of food democracy and food citizenship (Renting et al., 2012). Thus, consultancy also enabled CSOs to create spaces for more participatory forms of food system governance. CSOs engaging in this work can be said to have exercised a certain amount of both instrumental and structural power, mobilizing resources to shape the food system governance process and being directly involved in setting the agendas of emerging governance initiatives. Such consultancy by CSOs sits between multistakeholderism and co-governance on the food governance continuum, depending on how tightly the client (typically an LG) controls the process as well as the extent of the commitment of the CSO to embrace a process and policy recommendations grounded in food democracy and the human right to food.

The limitation of consultancy is that the initial decision to engage consultants rests with the government staff in question and is often a hidden space of political decision-making. Consequently, having organizational capacity to offer consulting services (instrumental power), building a reputation as a legitimate, trusted, and knowledgeable actor (discursive power), and fostering relationships to access consulting opportunities (structural power) are important for CSOs to conduct consulting work that can materially impact food system governance. In this study, CSOs participating in paid consulting work had previously developed evidence-based knowledge about specific food system issues, and had thus demonstrated an openness to engage with government and invested time into building and fostering relationships.

Conclusion

In summary, this study uncovered four ways in which Australian CSOs can affect future food system governance. First, CSOs can play the role of connector by linking parties for future food system governance collaboration or to fill knowledge gaps. SAUFN has been particularly effective in connecting parties with greater structural power to affect food system governance, such as LG officials and state departments, and identifying and connecting network members to “best-in-class” governance examples. Second, CSOs can reduce the contextual barriers for food system governance, such as lack of food systems literacy, by running events, developing submissions to government, and engaging in conversations with government officials. SAUFN’s co-learning project with LGs in South Australia is an example of this. Third, CSOs can build collaborative platforms for food system governance by facilitating communities of practice and knowledge generation and dissemination. The long-standing regional networks established by FFI and FFA illustrate the value of such platforms. Finally, CSOs can directly affect the emerging direction of food system policy and governance in Australia through the provision of consultancy and advisory services. In a growing number of cases, these have led directly to new food system and food security policies and action frameworks, as has been done in recent years by Sustain and YFC.

CSOs have a vital role to play in supporting the development and implementation of more participatory and socially just food system governance and policy that prioritizes health and wellbeing and environmental sustainability. While CSOs face significant challenges, especially in terms of funding, this research indicates that a small but important power shift may be taking place in Australian food

system governance, particularly at the local level. The lessons and insights from these case studies will be of relevance to researchers, policymakers, and CSOs across Australia engaged in food system governance.

This research also highlights the need for further studies in several directions. First, a cross-national comparison of the CSO role in food system governance would help identify what is working well in terms of effective and influential participation in food system governance. Secondly, a rigorous and independent assessment of the extent to which staff and managers in both LGs and funding agencies understand the need for CSOs to be actively involved in food system governance, and whether and how they enable them to do so, would provide invaluable evidence of how key individuals in these organizations either enable or constrain CSO participation. This research could also be cross-national and, if published regularly in the form of a report card or benchmarking study, could provide an incentive for better practice in these key sectors. Third, we see the need and opportunity for productive collaborations between researchers tracking the power of large agrifood corporations to shape and direct food policy and governance for their private benefit (for example, in the ultraprocessed food sector) with researchers analyzing how CSOs and food movement actors seek to disrupt and expose that power. 

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