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## Looking at Potential Impacts of Food Policy Councils

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A summary of ***Toward a Community Impact Assessment for Food Policy Councils: Identifying Potential Impact Domains***, by Larissa Calancie, Kristen Cooksey-Stowers, Anne Palmer, Natasha Frost, Holly Calhoun, Abbey Piner, Karen Webb, published in the fall 2018 issue of the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 8(3), 123–136. See the full paper at <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2018.083.001>

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### The issue

Food systems are composed of the biological and social elements that govern the cultivation, distribution, consumption, and disposal of food. They vary in size and geographical catchment area. Food systems have changed dramatically over the last century, which has resulted in significant shifts in how food is produced and consumed in the United States, Tribal Nations, and Canada. The changes are associated with complex public health issues, such as obesity and food insecurity, as well as economic and environmental challenges.

Food policy councils (FPCs) are a mechanism for investigating food system–related issues, organizing programs, and informing policy with the goal of strengthening food systems. FPCs thus address these complex issues. They also allow groups to take part in “food democracy,” the human agency involved in shaping food systems. FPCs help facilitate policy, systems, and environmental-level change (PSE) in their communities. This study suggests potential impact domains for the PSE changes and then organizes self-reported PSE changes that FPCs have helped facilitate into those potential impact domains.

### Study context and objectives

FPC studies and reports have described councils and the initiatives they help facilitate, but a comprehensive framework for understanding FPCs’ broad impacts is missing. This study aimed to develop such a framework by identifying potential impact domains and then applying that framework to a sample of FPC initiatives.

### How the study was conducted

The study team invited all 278 FPCs listed in the Food

Policy Network’s 2015 Food Policy Council Directory to participate in the study. Council contact persons received an email request asking that they share the link to the Food Policy Council Self-Assessment Tool (a survey) with their council members. The FPC Self-Assessment Tool asked questions about internal council capacity and included an open-ended question asking council members to describe any policy, systems, and environmental initiatives that the council helped facilitate in the past 12 months.

The study team used a qualitative research approach called content analysis to categorize the initiatives identified by survey respondents into potential domain impact areas and sectors of the food system. The initiatives could be categorized into more than one potential impact domain and sector. In some cases, there was not enough detail in the description of the initiatives for the study team to confidently apply a potential impact domain to an initiative, so they may have undercounted the potential impacts of some initiatives.

Six potential **impact domains** were used in the study:

- (1) supporting resilient food systems;
- (2) increasing access to healthy foods;
- (3) supporting economic development;
- (4) promoting equity in the food system;
- (5) promoting environmental sustainability; and
- (6) increasing knowledge of or demand for healthy foods.

The **food system sectors** used in the study include:

- (1) local agriculture and/or food production;
- (2) food processing;
- (3) food retailing;

- (4) institutional food service;
- (5) commercial food service;
- (6) food assistance and charitable food;
- (7) food waste; and
- (8) other initiatives.

## Results and discussion

Sixty-six out of the 278 FPCs (24%) that were contacted responded. The geographic distribution of the councils whose members responded is comparable to the geographic distribution in the most recent FPC Directory across the U.S. and Canada. Among the highest percentages responding were FPCs in the U.S., with 27% from the West, 23% from the South, 17% from the Midwest, and 15% from the Northeast. After that, 11% were from Central Canada, 3% from the Canadian Atlantic Provinces, 3% from Tribal Nations in the U.S., and 2% from Western Canada.

In total, 317 PSE initiatives that influenced a variety of food system sectors were reported. Frequently reported food sectors included local agriculture and/or food production (159, 50%). Other sectors included institutional food services (63, 20%), food assistance and charitable foods (45, 14%), food retail (43, 14%), food processing (16, 5%), commercial food service (13, 4%), and food waste (3, 4%).

The most common potential impacts were initiatives that promoted resilience in the food system (235, 74%), increased access to healthy food (171, 54%), and supported economic development (115, 36%). Less popular were initiatives that promoted equity within the food system (94, 30%), promoted environmental sustainability (82, 26%), and increased consumer knowledge of and/or demand for healthy food (27, 9%).

It should be noted, however, that the *outcomes* of FPC initiatives were not included in the evaluation. Studying the impacts of FPC initiatives on community-level outcomes is a much-needed area for future research. Other study limitations are that insufficient details on some initiatives may have caused misclassifications, and that the low response rate may have affected the results.

## Conclusion

This study categorized potential impacts of FPCs' policy, systems, and environmental initiatives, which is an important first step to a comprehensive impact assessment for FPCs. These domains of potential impacts could help council members identify and communicate how their work may benefit their communities. For example, the promotion of equity

within food systems is an important area that may draw interest from community members, decision-makers, and organizations that may not otherwise become engaged in food system issues.

Recognizing and communicating potential impacts of FPCs' work could result in more focused actions to influence specific impact domains. In addition, councils could increase the diversity of their membership by appealing to a broader audience. This study suggests that FPCs have the potential to influence a range of important impact areas, from access to healthy foods to resilient communities. Additional research is needed to evaluate community outcomes in these impact domains.



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