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Reflexive and inclusive: Reimagining local government engagement in food systems

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Introduction

It is time to shift the trajectory of how local governments engage in communities' food systems.

Local and regional government (LRG) involvement in food systems is essential and welcome, of course. However, recent experiences, as well as what is on the horizon, suggest that practitioners

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About this issue: This special issue is sponsored by the Growing Food Connections (GFC) national initiative. The 11 manuscripts in this issue were selected for publication in this special issue following a call for submissions developed by the guest editors of this special issue in partnership with JAFSCD and its advisors. Submitted manuscripts underwent the journal's peer-review process and an additional review by the guest editors of the special issue.

About the cover: The cover map displays results extracted from a national survey conducted with the members of the American Planning Association in 2014 by the Growing Food Connection team. A subset of the sample reported working on behalf of local, regional, or metropolitan governments and identified that their governments were engaged in food systems work. These responses are shown in solid green on the map. *Map created by Zhu Jin at the University at Buffalo (SUNY) Food Systems Planning and Healthy Communities Lab*

and scholars must reimagine the roles local governments play and how they play them. Failure to reflect and correct course on public policy measures to strengthen community food systems will be judged as short-sighted by historians, much the same way that urban renewal policies are critiqued today.

Thus it is critical to ask: How are LRGs engaging in the food system, and how are they reflecting on this engagement? How is this engagement advancing or impeding the planning, policy, and creation of inclusive, equitable, and just food systems? How is this progress being monitored and measured? And, more importantly, how should local governments be changing the nature of their engagement to ensure equitable and just outcomes? These are the key questions tackled in this special issue of the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* (JAFSCD).

LRG interest and involvement in food systems in the United States and Canada have been invigorated in the last decade (Raja, Born, & Kozlowski Russell, 2008; Raja & Whittaker, 2018). LRGs, including general-purpose governments such as city, town, and county governments, as well as special-purpose governments such as school districts, have responded to the calls of residents, community advocates, and scholars to address problems in the food system that have been thoroughly described elsewhere (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999). The nature of this response across the U.S. is documented by the Growing Food Connections (GFC) initiative, a national and comprehensive action-research initiative designed to build the capacity of local governments to promote food access and agricultural viability. GFC is the sponsor of this special issue of JAFSCD. Experience from the GFC initiative, which is led by the guest editors of this special issue, points to wide variation in where and how local and regional governments are engaging in the food system (http://www.growingfoodconnections.org). Indeed, the cover illustration of this special issue maps the geographic breadth of LRG engagement in communities' food systems. Some LRGs are rapidly adopting and implementing public policies to strengthen food systems, while others are still trying to figure out *whether and how* they should get involved. LRG engagement varies widely in the degree of formality: some local governments are convening conversations, while others are passing laws and ordinances. Purposeful inaction by local and regional governments, we argue, is a policy decision, too.

Although there are many ways to categorize public policies (Salamon, 2002), for heuristic purposes we categorize LRG policies as (i) soft policies, (ii) official plans, (iii) ordinances, bylaws, and regulations that are legally enforceable, (iv) actions that provide physical infrastructure, as well as (v) fiscal enactments that influence community food systems. The first two offer broad guidance, whereas the remaining three facilitate implementation. Soft policies include actions like resolutions and declarations, which are not enforceable by the power of law. Official or formal plans prepared or adopted by LRGs provide guidance about the future of a community with implications for its food system and include community food systems plans and comprehensive plans. Plans also set the stage for developing implementation tactics and tools in a community. Ordinances, or local laws, enacted by LRG entities regulate community food systems practices (e.g., zoning codes). Fiscal enactments result in public expenditures or the generation of public revenues tied to the food system (e.g., a tax law). Of course, many local and regional governments use a combination or variants of these policy tools. Interested readers can visit the Growing Food Connections database for hundreds of examples of LRG policies engaging with the food system.[1] The growth in local government plans and policies for food systems necessitates a critical lens that interrogates why and how these policies are developed, implemented, and evaluated.

Contributions of Manuscripts

The 11 articles making up this special issue illustrate the complex nature of current local government engagement in community food systems. They represent experiences of local governments

[1] http://growingfoodconnections.org/tools-resources/policy-database/

from across the U.S. and Canada, specifically from the states of California (multiple local governments), Maryland (Baltimore), New York (Buffalo and New York City), North Dakota (Cass County), Minnesota (Clay County and Minneapolis), Pennsylvania (Philadelphia), and Washington (Seattle), as well as the provinces of British Columbia (multiple municipalities) and Ontario (Toronto) in Canada. Some authors are scholars while others are practitioners, and some are scholar-practitioners, a dual role not unusual for scholars who work on food issues. Collectively, the articles illustrate new frontiers in and challenges to governance of community food systems; analyze how local government policies and plans are being developed to strengthen community food systems; probe the progress and challenges in implementing policies; and, importantly, analyze the ways in which local governments are monitoring and evaluating community food systems policy, as summarized below.

New Governance Issues

As with other local issue areas, food system *governance* arrangements are increasingly aimed at solving local problems (Andree, Clark, Levkoe, & Lowitt, in press). Governance takes us beyond 'government' in at least two ways. First, it acknowledges that more than just the public sector is involved in decision-making and bringing resources to the table. For example, many nonprofits are involved in social-service provisioning. Second, collective public decision-making and problem-solving benefit from greater engagement from nongovernmental actors, as broad-based engagement in governance processes can be more effective at achieving shared, public objectives than governments acting alone (Andree et al., in press). The Gupta et al. and Gold and Harden articles illustrate these points while analyzing the relationships between local governments and food policy councils.

The article by Gupta, Campbell, Sowerwine, Munden-Dixon, Capps, Feenstra, and Van Soelen Kim focuses on the relationship between local food policy councils (FPCs) and local government across 10 councils in California. Mainly through interview analysis, the authors find that the function of an FPC does follow form, at least in the cases they cite. This contributes to a growing debate about how FPCs should be structured. They find that structural autonomy—described as being organized outside of government, but having a strong relationship with government (membership, funding, etc.)—means that FPCs are better able to express the community agenda and promote inclusive processes, because they retain their independence. With connections to FPCs, local governments also bring extensive political connections, policy experiences, and intentional policy agendas. They find that the relational ties forged between local government staff and FPCs is critical to the work, in the way FPCs work with local government to shape policy agendas or to implement policies already enacted.

The Gold and Harden article dives deep into the collaborative governance processes of the Red River Valley region of Cass County, North Dakota, and Clay County, Minnesota. The authors provide a reflection and historical overview of a governance process that includes local governments from two states, in addition to a network of food system professionals and community members. They detail how governance arrangements both navigated boundaries and built bridges between the public and private, states and community, alternative and conventional, and consumers and producers. An adaptive governance arrangement with leadership aimed at building bridges, networks, and capacity leveraged what each of the parties could bring to catalyze change.

These two articles highlight the importance of adaptive governance arrangement between the public and private sectors over time, the role of co-education between sectors, intentional leadership that keeps people engaged, and the critical role of public agency staff like those in public health and Cooperative Extension to keep the arrangements active and impactful. They also share a word of caution: the formal institutionalization of arrangements within local government can stymie the productive capacity of nongovernmental partners and slow or shut-down policy advancements.

Development and Adoption of Local Government Policies and Plans

As new forms of governance for community food systems emerge, local governments too have

responded by planning, adopting, and implementing food-related policies and plans. Recent surveys illustrate the widespread adoption of food-related policies and plans by local governments in the US (Goddeeris, 2013; Raja & Whittaker, 2018). As noted earlier, a recently published database developed by our Growing Food Connections team contains about 200 local government policies. Further, over a dozen local governments have institutionalized food policy as government program areas (Hatfield, 2012).

A key way in which local governments are strengthening community food systems is by undertaking comprehensive planning linked to food systems. This response by local governments has brought North America a long way from nearly two decades ago when Pothukuchi and Kaufman (2000) claimed that food is "a stranger to the planning field." The authors in this special issue illustrate the many ways in which such planning and comprehensive engagement by local governments are unfolding.

Two articles tackle fairly new areas: resiliency in community food systems, and food waste management. Biehl, Buzogany, Baja, and Neff present a novel case where a partnership between a city government (Baltimore, Maryland) and a university (Johns Hopkins) advanced the assessment and planning for a more resilient food supply. The case offers insights for how other local governments may go about planning for a more food-secure city during, before, and after disasters. Otten, Diedrich, Getts, and Benson explore the ways in which local government agencies can work with food businesses and anti-hunger agencies to reduce, mitigate, and recover food waste and loss, using Seattle as a case study. Both Biehl and Otten reinforce the value of systemic engagement in the food system.

In addition to tackling new areas such as resilient community food systems, local governments are also innovating by building new alliances to strengthen community food systems. Mui, Khojasteh, Hodgson, and Raja highlight the re-emergence of alliances between the fields of planning and public health to strengthen community food systems. In addition to describing national trends, the authors describe food policy innovations in urban (Philadelphia, PA) and rural communities (Minnesota) made possible by intersectoral partnerships.

Along with general-purpose governments engaging in community food systems, other forms of local governments are beginning to engage in them as well. School districts, for example, play a crucial role in changing the ways in which children in the U.S. are fed. An article by Gilbert, Schindel, and Robert explores new theoretical frameworks by which school districts engage in community food systems reform. The authors propose *just transitions* as a way to guide the nature of school districts' engagement in community food systems.

Work in community food systems by local governments in the U.S. has often followed trends established by our neighbors to the North. Robert and Mullinix assess 61 formal municipal Official Community Plans (OCPs) in British Columbia and report that these frequently focus on food access and urban agriculture, while issues such as post-production capacity, waste management, and environmental stewardship remain somewhat absent. Reporting on the perspectives of municipal stakeholders in the city of Toronto toward new policies designed to promote urban agriculture and health equity, Mulligan, Archbold, Baker, Elton, and Cole report broad municipal support for urban agriculture, but also a concern about potential risks. Signaling a maturity in the field, Mulligan et al. argue that municipal engagement must go beyond regulatory changes to investments supporting community food systems, an issue that is addressed deeply by the remaining four articles in the issue.

Implementation of Policies and Plans

Local government engagement in community food systems is at a stage where efforts to *implement* policies and plans to strengthen community food systems are well underway. Lessons from across the U.S. and Canada suggest that implementation is a complicated process, with some successes but also many challenges.

Experience from municipalities in British Columbia and Wisconsin illustrate how both traditional and nontraditional municipal tools can be used to implement changes in community food

systems. Lavallée-Picard reflects on the experience of the city of Victoria, British Columbia, where the municipal government has implemented projects to promote urban agriculture following the adoption of a suite of policies. Early experiences point to the need for strong community engagement, public investments, and coordination and communications as essential elements of local government engagement.

Haines evaluates the use of a classic local government tool, zoning, as a means of implementing *regulatory* changes in the food system. The author reports a wide variation in how zoning ordinances across 104 rural and urban communities regulate community food systems, and suggests that opportunities remain to use zoning to strengthen local food systems.

Monitoring and Evaluation of Planning and Policy

Finally, Freudenberg, Willingham, and Cohen remind us that monitoring and evaluation of local government policy are critical for evidence-based public policy and management. For some reason, monitoring and evaluation are always at the end of the policy agenda—the topic is even the last on our list—as if it were some afterthought. While more local governments are getting involved in food policy-making and even institutionalizing food policy (Goddeeris, 2013; Hatfield, 2012; Hodgson, 2012), evaluation is lacking (e.g., Chen, Clayton, & Palmer, 2015). A review of the scholarship of agri-food system policy shows that of all policy stages, evaluation receives the least attention from researchers (Clark, Sharp, & Dugan, 2015). It is concerning that we cannot say whether all the efforts of local advocates, nonprofits, and local governments are working, much less whether they are making meaningful change.

Efforts to get food on the policy agenda dominated for decades. So it is refreshing to receive the potential signal from Freudenberg, Willingham, and Cohen that local food policy may be maturing, as they analyze a decade of food policy implementation in New York City (NYC). Their article describes the history of developing metrics to measure the city's progress, as well as an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses in metrics, as guidance for other cities. One important finding is tied to the scale of metrics: because NYC's metrics are aggregated across the city, neighborhood leaders are unable to compare their community to others. The lack of a comprehensive organizing framework and the focus on implementation instead of outcomes prevent the use of metrics in assessing progress toward broader food policy goals. The authors also reveal the challenges of identifying shared measures across places, measures that represent intangible benefits, and measures that represent process. They raise the question of *who* gets to decide what is measured in the first place, reminding us that what gets measured is a policy in and of itself. Here they are also signaling that inclusion in decision-making is as important to equity as the equity of outcomes.

Key Issues Raised by the Special Issue

Process

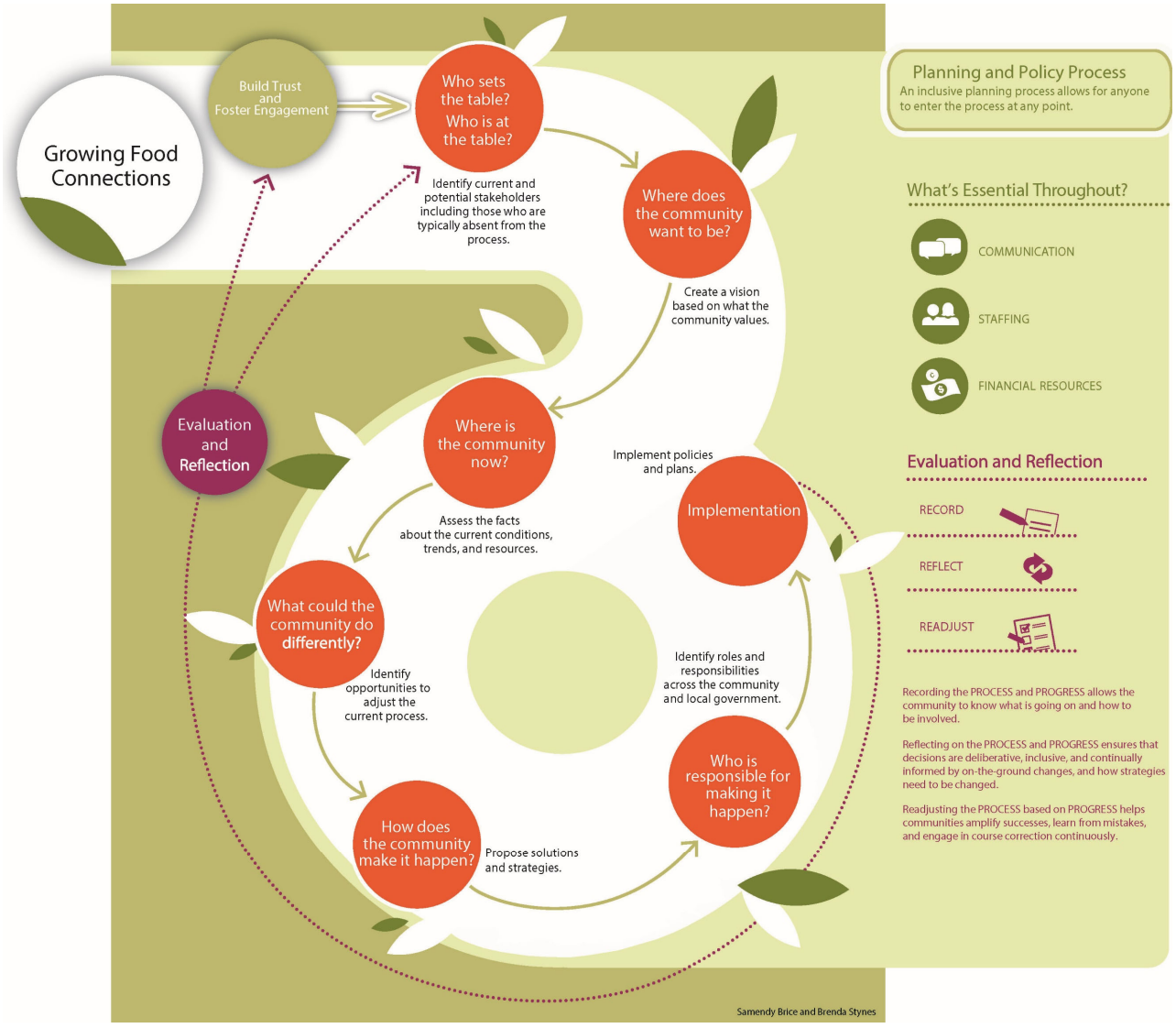
The creation of equitable community food systems, however defined by communities, results from complex processes that include, but are not limited to, public policy processes. Exclusion and injustice in planning and policy processes are unlikely to lead to equitable and just food systems. The design of the *process* by which community food systems are made (or unmade) deserve scrutiny and attention by scholars and practitioners alike.

In prior work completed in Growing Food Connections communities, we find that the *design* of the policy-making process sets the stage for whether the resulting policy considers questions of equity (Clark, Freedgood, Irish, Hodgson, & Raja, 2017). In other words, what you intend to plan for (or not) is what you get (or not). A lack of self-reflection by local government staff and decision-makers when designing processes likely reinforces historical inequities in the community. We re-emphasize some of our recommendations from this work: that designers of public engagement processes need to reflect on historical and structural barriers that prevent community members from participating, use practices to foster relationships and trust with the people most likely to be affected by public policies, and commit sufficient resources to ensure active and equitable engagement throughout the process.

In Figure 1 we offer an illustration of a policy and planning process that is attentive to design. Note that the starting point is not the design of the process. We stress that any policy process design must be built on trust between the public sector and community members. Undergoing a process not girded by trust among community members and staff and decision-makers of institutions will not have legitimacy, and more importantly, will not result in inclusive and equitable outcomes.

The first consideration for policy process is *not* who is invited to the policy development table, which continues to be a common starting place for policy and planning conversations. The first reflection should be, who is who is setting the table and designing the policy process in the first place. The design of the process—the writing of the agenda—sets the parameters for what is on the table (and off the table), including how community problems are framed. The figure emphasizes the related and ongoing practice of self-reflection and the action that results (readjustment) throughout the process. Also required throughout the process are methods and forums for documentation, communication, and deliberation that are supported by adequate staffing and financial resources.

Figure 1. Inclusive Planning and Policy Processes for Strengthening Community Food Systems



The shape of the process below signifies two important facets of policy-making. First, policy-making is not linear. Second, because of the framing of inclusivity and the nonlinearity of the process, people can engage in, or exit and re-enter, the process at any of the points as answers are being developed for the questions (the orange circles). Finally, evaluation and refinement may result in coming back to the process itself, or attending to foundations of relational trust and engagement with the community.

Measurement and Evaluation

Engagement in community food systems planning is no longer a new concern for local governments. Local governments across North American have developed, enacted, and, indeed, implemented policies that are ostensibly designed to strengthen community food systems. Yet there is very little empirical evidence for these efforts making a difference in communities (Chen et al., 2015). For true progress, the next decade has to be one of measuring progress (or failure), uncovering successes, and jettisoning failed, if well-intentioned, local government policies.

Equity

A key reflection from our own prior work as well as work with Growing Food Connections (Raja, Morgan, & Hall, 2017), and the work of some authors in this issue, is the question of *who* drives, and *who* benefits from, local government engagement in community food systems. It is important to address the difference between who is invited, who builds, and who sets the table in the first place. In a way, Freudenberg et al. touch on this. Several other articles point to the importance of inviting those who are most affected by local food systems policies to the table to participate in decision-making. We suggest pushing further so that the most affected determine the food system agenda. In other words, local governments must open the process to give those most affected by policies the time and tools to build the table in the first place.

A lack of resources is often noted as a limitation to addressing equity in local food policy and planning processes (Hodgson, 2012), and is raised in this special issue. This begs the question regarding whether local governments should aim to do less, but do so more equitably. Further, while the literature provides equity frameworks to apply to the policy process (e.g., Gilbert et al.), a lack of methods and metrics to guide and use to monitor and evaluate policies is a distinct barrier to advancing equity.

Duality of Researcher Roles

Local government engagement in community food systems is often led by leaders who play the dual role of scholars and practitioners. Indeed, in his reflection Jason Reece rightly praises JAFSCD for publishing activist scholarship. This editorial, too, is written by scholars who identify as community-engaged scholars, often participating as practitioners, policy-shapers, and community advocates in their own research projects. This duality of roles has significant benefits; such scholars bring disciplinary rigor as well as a commitment to equity and justice. Yet there remains a danger—including in our own work—of our being *too* close to our work. Reflecting on the articles in this volume, and on our own work, we wonder whether participants in food system policy and planning are able to see trade-offs of local government engagement in community food systems. What might we miss? What checks and balances do we need to put into place to ensure that we retain both deep engagement with communities and the rigor of scholarship beyond standard methodological quality checks (for example, see Porter, 2018)?

The Way Forward: What is the Role of Local Government in Community Food Systems?

There is no question in our minds that local governments must be engaged in food systems. In this vein, other scholars have likened food to a "civil commons," requiring our democratic institutions to work with citizens to steward the public resource to meet societal goals (Sumner, 2011). The soil-to-soil food infrastructure is part of the civil commons, and not only important for food itself, but for a whole host of other benefits to communities that have been ably detailed elsewhere. In short, LRGs cannot afford to *not* consider community food systems as public

infrastructure. But to be effective they must pay special attention to actively engaging and including in decision-making the people most affected by the plans and policies they create.

Food systems are intricately linked to other systems that make communities work: transportation systems, ecological systems, economic systems, etc. As LRGs deepen their work in community food systems, they run the risk of creating a food system silo where community food systems work is disconnected from other local government work. In its early days, food systems did not necessarily have a clear home in local government agencies. As a result, work was spread across multiple agencies, which likely resulted in efficiencies and innovations. Now, as community food systems activities become a legitimate domain of a *particular* agency or department, we run the risk of slowing innovation.

Inclusive and equitable governance arrangements that focus on the process of stewarding community food systems are the way forward. As discussed earlier, this way forward is not linear (see Figure 1). Stewards must engage in reflexive practice, reflecting and readjusting both on processes used, and on resulting policies, in addition to their own role in governance (Rein & Schön, 1996; Schön, 1993), while continually attending to inclusive and equitable engagement. Stepping back from individual policies, reflection is required to reassess what we know about the problems in the food system in the first place. Readjustment of individual policies may give way to reimagining what is needed (Schön, 1993). It has been nearly two decades since Pothukuchi and Kaufman's (2000) call for local governments to engage in food system planning and policy making. It is only fitting that the way forward for local governments be about reflecting inward, reaching outward, and perhaps reimagining how our food system, as a civil commons, can best serve all community members.

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