

UC Cooperative Extension Study of California Food Policy Councils

September 2018

Research team:

Clare Gupta, Public Policy Specialist, UC Davis

Julia Van Soelen Kim, North Bay Food Systems Advisor, UC Cooperative Extension

Jennifer Sowerwine, Metropolitan Food Systems Specialist, UC Berkeley

Gail Feenstra, Food Systems Coordinator for Food and Society, UC SAREP

Dave Campbell, Community Studies Specialist, UC Davis

Shosha Capps, Community Food Systems Analyst, UC SAREP

Kate Munden-Dixon, Ph.D. Candidate, Geography Graduate Group, UC Davis

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes findings from a study of California food policy councils conducted by a team of University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) researchers from 2016-2018. The research draws on a survey which gathered data on 31 of California's 33 known food policy councils (FPCs), and on more than 60 interviews with FPC members to prepare in-depth case studies of 10 councils. The data provide: 1) background on the nature, structure, and functions of FPCs; 2) a summary of FPC policy priorities and achievements; and 3) insight into the types and sources of information FPCs use in their work. A particular focus of the research was examining the nature of relationships between FPCs and university researchers, including UC Cooperative Extension. The report concludes with key takeaways from our research, including strategies associated with successful FPC processes and outcomes.

Nature, Structure, and Functions of California Food Policy Councils

- FPCs vary significantly in size, structure, funding, and approach to food systems change.
- The majority of California FPCs formed in the last decade and are county-based.
- Most FPCs are community coalitions or collaborations that are neither embedded in a government agency nor incorporated as their own nonprofit organization.
- Over half of California FPCs either currently receive funding (n=17) or have in the past (n=8); six have never received funding. Funding typically is small, \$10,000 or less/year.
- While a few large councils have multiple paid staff, most councils either have part-time staff or rely completely on volunteers. Frequently mentioned organizational development challenges are *securing funding* to support staff and *membership engagement*.
- The majority of councils have ties to local government; public agency representatives attend meetings, contribute meeting space, and provide facilitation.
- Public health and anti-hunger groups are the most common FPC participants; in general, the farming/production sector is under-represented. Only eight of 31 FPCs indicate that members represent the community's ethnic, gender, racial and economic diversity.

Policy Priorities and Achievements

- All 10 case study councils engage in *some* activities aimed at influencing public policy; for most, however, direct policy advocacy is an infrequent activity.
- Just under half of FPCs surveyed seldom or never engage in policy advocacy. Importantly, however, our case studies found that FPC community engagement activities have the *potential* to influence policy indirectly, positioning FPCs as a kind of incubator or think tank for new policy ideas to emerge and gain community visibility.

- The information exchange, networking, and educational work that FPCs emphasize meaningfully contributes to “upstream” efforts to raise awareness about certain food system issues (i.e. policy agenda setting), and “downstream” efforts to implement policies.
- FPCs’ policy priorities include a wide range of topics from food production, distribution and transportation, to equity and social justice issues around food access; the most common policy priority for California FPCs is healthy food access.

Use of Research or other Forms of Information

- FPCs rely less on university research than on community-generated information, compelling stories, and government data.
- They access information primarily by what members bring to the table from their own public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and community-based organizations.
- Approximately a third of FPCs we surveyed indicated that they made use of scholarly information from the University of California or other research institutions.

Key Takeaways and Strategies for Success

- Respondents see *information sharing* as the most valuable FPC activity; it facilitates collaboration and shifts participant thinking towards a systems-view of food policy work.
- Members who are “knowledge brokers”, including Cooperative Extension Advisors, are connected to many different knowledge sources and are able to draw on these myriad sources to serve their council’s data and information needs.
- FPCs cite the value of combining information from numbers *and* stories; they indicate that experiential data are often as compelling with policy-makers as statistics.
- Some FPCs view food system change as requiring a broad and inclusive consortium of stakeholders (e.g., ranging from production to food access) and seek to bring stakeholders with diverse values together. Other FPCs emphasize attracting allies who share core values and a commitment to advocacy on behalf of food systems change.
- Policy achievements often occur when a sub-group of the FPC (i.e. working group; task force, campaign) rallies around a particular policy priority, enlisting allies as needed.
- Effective FPCs have leaders with deep experience and connections in the community and a good feel for the nuances involved in effective political organizing.

Overall, the work of Food Policy Councils at the local and state level is making a significant difference in our state, providing a meaningful venue to pursue food systems policy and change.