Local Food Policy Councils - Adopting Social Network Theories to Support Food Systems

Chyi-Lyi Kathleen Liang[1]* and Amber Brown[2]

[1]Center for Environmental Farming Systems, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, USA

[2]Department of Agribusiness, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, USA

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*****Corresponding author:** Chyi-Lyi Kathleen Liang, Kellogg Distinguished Professor of Sustainable Agriculture and Director of Center for Environmental Farming Systems, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, USA

What is the Issue?

Studies of food systems and food insecurity have gained significant attention in recent years. The United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (USDA ERS) released key statistics to show the most recent situations of food insecurity in the United States [1]. The USDA ERS has defined food security versus food insecurity in the same report:

a) Food secure-These households had access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members.

b) Food insecure-At times during the year, these households were uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food to meet the needs of all their members because they had insufficient money or other resources for food. Food-insecure households include those with low food security and very low food security.

c) Low food security-These food-insecure households obtained enough food to avoid substantially disrupting their eating patterns or reducing food intake by using a variety of coping strategies, such as eating less varied diets, participating in Federal food assistance programs, or getting emergency food from community food pantries.

d) Very low food security-In these food-insecure households, normal eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake was reduced at times during the year because they had insufficient money or other resources for food.
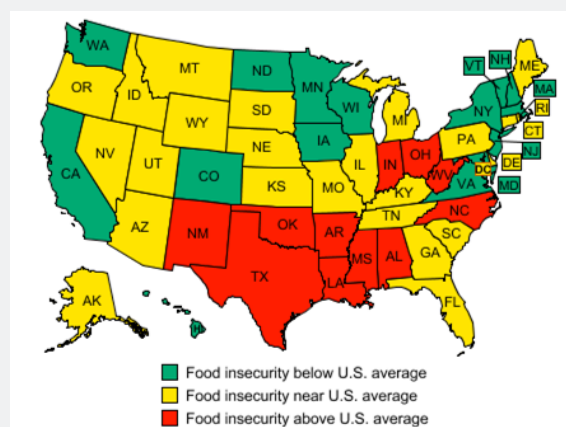
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, using data from the December 2015, 2016, and 2017 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements.

Figure 1: Prevalence of Food Insecurity, average 2015-2017.

In 2017, 11.8 percent (15.0 million) of the households in the United States had experienced food insecurity at some point. Seven percent (9.3 million) were in the low food security category and 4.5 percent (5.8 million) were in the very low food security category [1]. There seemed to be a slight improvement in the percentage of households experiencing food insecurity from 2016 to

2017; however, many states in the U. S. are still fighting against the persistent issues of food insecurity. For example (Figure 1), eleven out of the fifty states in the country showed higher state-level prevalence rates of food insecurity than the U. S. average (12.3 percent with a margin of error 0.19 percent) based on 3-year data between 2015 and 2017 [1]. The issues of food insecurity would potentially hinder social-economic mobility and long-term community health [2-12].

Community partners and concerned citizens have come together to identify strategies and approaches to alleviate food insecurity. Partners or participants of local/regional food systems engage in discussions to brainstorm ideas or activities collectively to create solutions to improve food availability, accessibility, affordability, and accountability at local or regional levels. These partners or participants of food systems sometimes form a collaborative network or several small-scale working groups that would contribute to the formation of inter- or intra-organizational initiatives to combat food insecurity in rural and urban communities. Various types of food networks represent the levels of relationships between actors within and across food systems and their interactions with one another [13]. The relationships formed within a food network seem to offer benefit and support to stakeholders such as delivering education, resources, programs, projects, information, and policy recommendations [14]. One of the most commonly known organizations established by stakeholders is a Food Policy Council.

What is a Food Policy Council?

A report released by the Institute for Food and Developmental Policy [15] described a Food Policy Council as a group of representatives and stakeholders coming from different segments of the food system, for example, farming, production, service, utility, processing, distribution, handling, wholesale, retail, restaurant, and waste recycling. A Food Policy Council often provides a platform to discuss food issues, 'The central aim of most Food Policy Councils is to identify and propose innovative solutions to improve local or state food systems, spurring local economic development and making food systems more environmentally sustainable and socially just.' [15]. According to the same report, the first Food Policy Council was established in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1982. Members of Food Policy Councils generally include advocates for food justice, educators, non-profit organizations, local citizens, government officials, farmers, small business owners, food processors, and distributors [15]. The number of Food Policy Councils in the United States has grown significantly [16]. California and North Carolina seem to be two leading states with the most significant number of active Food Policy Councils in the United States.

Food Policy Councils convene to address issues in the community and to develop programming toward policy-oriented goals [17]. It might be challenging to create a concrete definition of a project, program, or policy given the fast-evolving nature of food issues and stakeholders' responsibilities within a council. An ac-

tive Food Policy Council relies on a constant review of goals and objectives corresponding to relevancy and stakeholders' needs [18].

Linkages between Social Network Theories and Food Policy Councils

Research evidence has revealed a strong affiliation between the development of Food Policy Councils and the Social Network Theory. Social Network Theory started as Sociometry, a concept developed by Jacob Moreno and Helen Jennings in 1933, to provide a representation for the interpersonal structure of groups using "sociograms". A Sociometry used nodes and lines to show interpersonal relationships [19]. This concept has since evolved into a more sophisticated and complex Social Network Theory to quantify and measure the levels of connections and information exchanges between individuals within a network or network organizations [20]. Scholars have described Social Network Theory as the study of how individuals and organizations connect/interact with each other and how information is transferred within their networks. Network members could be individuals or organizations that share similar values, interests, visions, purposes, or passion targeting on commonly agreed issues. Social Network Analysis seeks to understand, examine, and evaluate the relationships between actors within a network and between network organizations [20-22].

There are three commonly recognized types of networks: Egocentric networks (networks that are connected with a single node or individual), Socio-centric networks (networks that are closed networks by default), and Open-system networks (networks where the boundary lines are not clearly defined). Various levels and types of relationships exist in different configurations of social networks. Relationships between individuals or organizations are often described as "ties." Strong ties represent a close or intensive relationship, while weak ties represent a further-removed relationship. Empirical studies have not confirmed if strong ties or weak ties link to specific social-economic outcomes. Many scholars have attempted and applied a variety of methods to capture the meaning, flow, and exchange of a social network. Granovetter [23] found weak ties led to a higher number of substantial job opportunities than strong ties. Chamlee-Wright and Myers [24] adopted the Social Network Theory to examine the role of social networks and their impacts on social learning in philanthropic networks. They found that non-priced information feedback mechanisms could act like other essential qualities of market prices. Quardokus and Henderson [25] argued that it would be important to understand the informal social structure of the academic department beyond individual faculty. They applied Social Network Analysis techniques to uncover hidden social networks that could influence a change initiative. Quatman and Chelladurai [26] provided several examples from the sport management and organizational behavior bodies of literature to demonstrate how Social Network Theory and analysis could enrich future research of the sport management field.

A Food Policy Council is a semi-structured social network, which implies that the formation and governance of a Food Policy Council are organic or as 'quasi-firms' [27]. Members of a Food Policy Council come from different organizations with various background, experiences, and demographics. These characteristics of members mirror some discussions in network theories such as the horizontal patterns of exchange [28] and interdependency [25,29]. Food Policy Councils in the United States generally fall into one of the three categories: Government-supported Food Policy Councils, Non-profit and independent Food Policy Councils, and Hybrid Food Policy Councils. Government-supported Food Policy Councils are usually task forces or advisory boards that utilize government staff support and advise government agencies [18]. Non-profit and independent Food Policy Councils operate without formal government affiliation, and Hybrid Food Policy Councils act independently but are often affiliated with a government agency [17]. The most common type of organizational structure for a Food Policy Council was being housed within another non-profit organization, followed by being embedded in a government agency. Some food policy councils are a part of an independent grassroots coalition or led by an independent 501(c)3 non-profit organization or embedded in a university or Extension office [16].

A Food Policy Council leads members and supporters in creating ideas, designing strategies, and implementing actions as a "change agent" in a social network. Aiming at solving food issues, a Food Policy Council directly improves the social capital of a community by providing information to producers, consumers, and service providers. The nature of Social Network Theory is deeply rooted in the structure, operation, management, and coordination of a Food Policy Council. The center of the Social Network Theory is "relationships" and about how individuals and organizations connect and interact with each other - types of relationships, the density of connections, gaps of relationships, and quality of relationships. Many successful Food Policy Councils help local groups determine and prioritize specific problems by investing time to work together. It takes time and effort to build meaningful and resilient relationships through trust, negotiation, communication, patience, and conflict resolution [30].

A successful Food Policy Council resembles a productive social network with a clearly defined mission, goals, agenda, plan, actions, and assessment. A report has identified the Los Angeles Food Policy Council to be one of the largest and most successful Food Policy Councils in the United States [31]. The mayor's office launched the Los Angeles Food Policy Council in 2011, and approximately three hundred food system stakeholders participated in its working groups. Many Food Policy Councils around the country have utilized the social network tactics to form working groups or sub-committees to involve and engage stakeholders using open forums, community listening sessions, and local food celebration events. Research findings concur that the characteristics of a successful Food Policy Council are similar to a reliable and sustainable social network. The outcomes of a successful council's works often link to improving the utility of information and knowledge exchange, encouraging collaboration and innovative thinking, integrating data and information with real-life stories, promoting inclusion and diversity, and maintaining strong leadership and committed orientations [32].

What is Next?

Not all Food Policy Councils have a smooth ride. Many Food Policy Councils have struggled due to lack of funding/resources, lack of support, lack of stakeholders' participation, lack of volunteers to coordinate/manage the agenda, and lack of structured initiatives/activities to deliver outcomes. Researchers have identified several key elements that trigger the failure of a food policy council [15]. Working with diverse membership and constituencies require copious amounts of time to build trust amongst the members, and it could be problematic if the funding agent has expectations for the Food Council Policy producing results in a short time [15]. Working with diverse membership and constituencies could also be challenging if each member has a pre-determined agenda and not be willing to negotiate. Political climates could complicate the iterations and discussions as the Food Policy Council's members identify priorities and resources. Funding and relying on volunteers to operate and manage the Food Policy Council seems to be a significant issue to stale the actions. Finally, it might be challenging to establish an agreeable method to measure and evaluate a council's impact. Following good examples and best practices will be a reasonable approach for new and emerging Food Policy Councils to learn from others. To recruit a diverse and representative membership early in the process will improve the communication, understanding, confidence, respect, and trust within the council's structure. The Social Network Theory emphasizes on building bridges with collaborators, partners, and stakeholders through effective planning and communication. And these are principles to ensure the longevity and prosperity of a successful Food Policy Council.

Acknowledgment

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