

Food First BACKGROUNDER

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The Hartford Food System

Democracy in Action: Food Policy Councils

By Food First

The food and financial crises bring fresh urgency to concerns over hunger, food access, public health, labor, and economic development issues—with citizens and governments beginning to connect these issues back to the food system. Councils are springing up across North America to “connect the dots”¹ between the growing number of neighborhood food initiatives and communities forging policies for just, healthy food systems.

What can we learn from North America’s three-decade experiment in local food policy? Food First just completed a study: *Food Policy Councils, Lessons Learned* that includes a literature review and 48 interviews with the people involved in Food Policy Councils. The full report can be read at www.foodfirst.org. While food policy planning is still in its infancy, Food Policy Councils provide a hopeful model for creating a more sustainable, democratic food system.

The Case for Food Policy Councils

For decades, the failings of our food system have been seen as isolated problems, to be dealt with by a fragmented array of government and non-governmental agencies at the state and local levels. These failings are largely treated separately: Health advocates tackle diet-related diseases through healthy eating campaigns. Farm groups look for solutions to the ever-shrinking profit margins for family farms. Food justice groups advocate for better access to healthy food in low-income neighborhoods. Other groups attempt to eradicate poverty and create local jobs, and fight for better working conditions for immigrants and food workers, focusing on living wage laws and union organizing. Food Policy Councils are attempting to integrate these efforts under one, locally-controlled roof.



photo of City Sticker Farms by Rebecca Meyer

- launch or support programs and services that address local and regional needs.

Not all Food Policy Councils take on all four functions. However, these four functions are often integrated—for example in programs connecting local farmers and co-ops directly to food banks and school lunch programs.

From the Bottom Up

The number of Food Policy Councils at all levels—state, county, and local—has been steadily growing over the last decade. Food Policy Councils are overwhelmingly a grassroots phenomenon, with most initiated by some sort of grassroots action. Many have no funding at all; most operate on a shoe-string budget at best. While we cannot measure the direct impact of councils’ policies, there have been many success stories.

In the 27 years since the first Food Policy Council was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, Food Policy Councils have racked up many accomplishments: getting food stamps accepted at farmers’ markets, facilitating contracts between farm bureaus and food banks, changing zoning laws for urban agriculture, supporting union organizing efforts to reduce the dependence of food and tourism workers on food assistance, building affordable

housing for farmworkers, passing mandatory menu labeling laws, conducting food system assessments, initiating school breakfast programs, preserving farmland, and reforming city and school food purchasing.

Perhaps no one council has been more celebrated than the Toronto Food Policy Council. The council designed Canada’s first Food Access Grants Program, which directed \$2.4 million for kitchen purchases in 180 schools and social agencies. The council also helped to develop a service listing local emergency food programs for people in need. Leading the way within city government, the council championed the Innocenti Declaration of UNICEF and the WHO, leading to the “Mother Friendly Workplace” initiative at Toronto City Hall. The Toronto council also has a strong focus on urban sustainability, advancing programs ranging from urban agriculture to local food processing and wet waste recovery. The Toronto Food Policy Council also founded the Rooftop Garden Resource Group to promote a green roof industry in Canada, and helped initiate the City Hall Green Roof project in 1999.ⁱⁱⁱ

Potential of Food Policy Councils

The full potential of Food Policy Councils is difficult to assess. There is no way to know how many Food

2 A Food Policy Council consists of a group of representatives and stakeholders from many sectors of the food system. They often include anti-hunger and food justice advocates, educators, non-profit organizations, concerned citizens, government officials, farmers, grocers, chefs, local business owners, food processors and food distributors. Food Policy Councils create opportunities to discuss and strategize among these various sectors, and create an arena for viewing and addressing issues of the local food system as a whole. Councils can be city, county, regional, or state-wide. Some councils are actually housed in a government agency. Others are hosted by non-profits or become non-profits themselves.ⁱⁱ

The central aim of Food Policy Councils is to identify and propose innovative solutions to improve local or state food systems, making them more environmentally sustainable and socially just. We found Food Policy Councils generally have four functions:

- to serve as a forum for discussing food issues,
- to foster coordination between sectors in the food system,
- to evaluate and influence policy, and

FARM TO SCHOOL IN NEW MEXICO

New Mexico is now a national leader in the farm-to-school movement, thanks to the non-profit Farm to Table and its state and city Food Policy Councils. Starting in 2001 following a state decision encouraging public schools to use locally-grown produce, the Farm-to-School Project began in three pilot schools in the Santa Fe school district. Nearly 40 farmers sold directly to the school district, primarily through a farmers’ cooperative. Funded by a USDA Community Food Projects grant, a contribution from the New Mexico Department of Agriculture and the USDA’s Federal State Marketing and Improvement Program, the program expanded to reach 17 districts throughout the state as a network of alternative purchasing contracts grounded in relationships with local farms. Further, policy work by the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council led to the development of the Nutrition Rule for Competitive Foods and to the Healthy Kids-Healthy Economy legislation, which strengthened the case for farm-to-school programs in the state. By regulating vending machines, a la carte foods, and school fundraisers, the New Mexico Food Policy Council has taken steps to ensure that students are getting quality locally-grown produce. They have removed unhealthy food products from schools and from school purchasing contracts as well.^{iv}

The Detroit Reality

1. Many Detroiters do not have a grocery store within a mile of their homes
2. “Fast food” has practically replaced home-cooked meals in many households
3. Detroit’s majority African American population is dependent on others to feed them

-Detroit Black Community Food Security Network⁶

Noting that “Detroit’s majority population must be represented at all levels and in all aspects of the food system,”^{vi} the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN) set out to build an alternate reality, one where everyone has access to adequate, healthy, culturally appropriate food. The DBFSN analysis takes a hard look at structural racism and economic injustice in the food system. The Network found, “There exist two grocery stores owned and or operated by African Americans in Detroit. It is unknown whether any food wholesalers, farmers, distributors or food processing facilities providing food for the city of Detroit are owned, operated, or even hire Detroiters, specifically African-Americans; or if any of the food products consumed in our community were developed by people from our community. Aside from cashiers, baggers, stock persons and a few butchers, Detroiters, specifically African-Americans, are absent from the food system.”^{vii} To address this, the Network called for policy to eliminate barriers to African-American participation and ownership in all aspects of the food system; explore the re-distribution of wealth through cooperative community ownership; and hold companies profiting from Detroiters accountable for integrating Detroiters into their operations. In addition to creating a platform of key issues and policy actions, in 2008, the DBFSN helped the city form a Food Policy Council to begin to address them.

Policy Councils have dissolved or disbanded, nor is there presently a method to measure the specific impact councils have had on food security. What is clear is that the rise of Food Policy Councils points to a powerful and hopeful trend: Citizens and neighborhoods are directly influencing the policies of their local food systems, and are creating a context in which equitable and sustainable alternatives for good, healthy food can flourish. Based on our literature review and interview data, we believe that Food Policy Councils have five key potentials:

- **To address public health through improving food addressing hunger and food insecurity, and improving the quality of available food**
- **To affect national and level policy debates**
- **To connect multiple sectors that wouldn’t otherwise work together**
- **To bring local food policy into the mainstream**
- **To boost local economies and combat poverty**

In other words, Food Policy Councils have the potential to *democratize the food system*. The failings of our current food system are largely suffered in neighborhoods and constituencies

with little political (or economic) voice. Food Policy Councils can amplify the voices of underserved communities that have traditionally had limited access to power. The Detroit Food Policy Council for example, made addressing the underlying racial and economic disparities in food access, retail ownership, food sector jobs, and control over food-producing resources a cornerstone of their policy platform—explicitly attacking injustice in the food system and creating space for greater economic democracy.

What people refer to as “the food movement” is actually a collection of social movements: food justice, fair food, fair trade, organic food, slow food, food security, public health, food sovereignty, family farms... and local folks just trying to make things better. The list is long because the problems with our food systems are extensive, systemic, and acute. While these groups have much in common, it would be naive to think they coordinate their actions. Food Policy Councils are just one expression of this “movement of movements.” Nevertheless, Food Policy Councils have a unique quality within this wide array of activists, advocates and practitioners: *they create democratic spaces for convergence in diversity*.

The power of informed, democratic collaboration, especially when linked to the specific places where people

live, work and eat, has an additional, emergent quality: it can change the way we—and others—think. This is social learning, the basis for social change. Food Policy Councils hold great potential as action-centers for the social learning needed to build democracy into the food system. Food Policy Councils are moving their communities toward robust local food systems by helping people in communities influence parts of the food system that they have the power to change, and by building political will for deeper, systemic change.

To read the full report visit: www.foodfirst.org.

NOTES

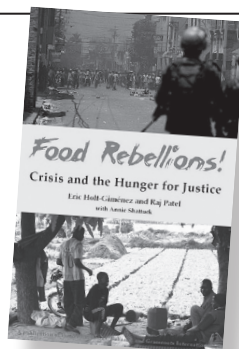
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- vii. Ibid.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR GENEROUS SUPPORT

Food Rebellions! Crisis and the Hunger for Justice

by Eric Holt-Giménez and Raj Patel, with Annie Shattuck. Today there are over a billion hungry people on the planet, more than ever before in history. Why, in a time of record harvests, are a record number of people going hungry? And why are a handful of corporations making record profits? *Food Rebellions!* tells the real story behind the global food crisis and documents the growing trend of grassroots solutions to hunger spreading around the world. Official plans to solve the world food crisis call for more free trade and technical fixes--solutions that have already failed. *Food Rebellions!* is a trail marker on the journey to end hunger and build food sovereignty. \$19.95

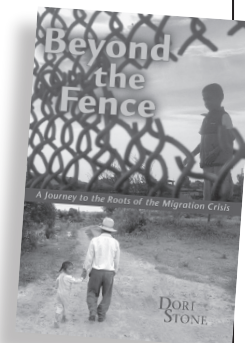
To book one of the authors for a college or other community event, contact Martha Katigbak-Fernandez at (510) 654-4400 ext. 221



Beyond the Fence: A Journey to the Roots of the Migration Crisis

by Dori Stone, informs the immigration debate in the U.S., which is highly controversial, emotional, and often confusing. She explores migration issues that are largely unnoticed by the public in the U.S. and the mainstream media - the stories and surprising possibilities that get lost in the debate over fences and undocumented migrants exploited at below minimum wage. They are the tales of people's desperation and irretrievable

loss, but also their growing visions of hope. They are the stories of farmers, politicians and activists on both sides of the border. "The book is ideally suited for students, but I can think of few people who would not benefit from reading it." - Angus Wright, author of *The Death of Ramon Gonzales: The Modern Agricultural Dilemma*. *Beyond the Fence*, \$16.95



NEW BOOKS FROM FOOD FIRST

Agrofuels in the Americas edited by Richard Jonasse, explores the impact of agrofuel production in the Global South, where the rural poor and indigenous populations are losing their access to land, and with it, the ability to feed themselves coupled with rising food prices due to the diversion of land to fuel crops.

Authors include Miguel Altieri and Elizabeth Bravo, Eric Holt-Giménez and Isabella Kenfield, Gretchen Gordon and Jessica Aguirre, Richard Jonasse, Maria Luisa Mendonça, Laura Hurtado, Annie Shattuck, and Rachel Smolker and Brian Tokar. \$18.95

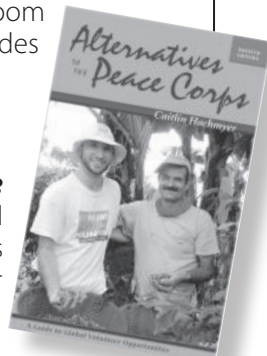


Caminos: The Immigrant's Trail

The companion 20-minute documentary DVD, suitable for classroom use, includes a study guide. \$20.00

Alternatives to the Peace Corps

edited by Caiti Hachmyer, is the original resource for finding community-based, grassroots volunteer work-the kind of work that changes the world, one person at a time. \$11.95



Campesino a Campesino: Voices from Latin America's Farmer to Farmer Movement for Sustainable Agriculture

by Eric Holt-Giménez, tells the inspiring story of a true grassroots movement: poor peasant farmers teaching one another how to protect their environment while still earning a living. The first book in English about the farmer-led sustainable agriculture movement in Latin America, *Campesino a Campesino* includes lots of first-person stories and commentary from the farmer-teachers, mixing personal accounts with detailed analysis of the political, socioeconomic, and ecological factors that galvanized the movement. \$19.95



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