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Mapping food policy networks' engagement with food system transformation: A policy cycle approach

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Article title: Mapping food policy networks' engagement with food system transformation: A policy cycle approach

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Abstract

While many assert that food system transformation is needed to address the wicked problems embedded within the industrial food system, few can agree on the objectives, timeline or scope for how such transformation should occur. "Food Policy Networks" – multi-sector collaborations that are formed to address everyday food systems' issues – offer diverse possible pathways towards such transformation. In general, scholars agree that the transformative capacity of Food Policy Networks – defined here as their ability to drive structural change rather than performing isolated, issue-specific interventions – is tied to their ability to engage with and shape food policy. However, a significant research gap persists regarding their potential to catalyse food system transformation and where such changes may occur. These criticisms underscore the need for research that adopts dynamic and power-informed perspectives to assess both the productive and disruptive potential of Food Policy Networks. In this paper, we apply a policy cycle approach to deepen

understandings of the role and deployment of policy interventions by Food Policy Networks to advance food system transformation. We draw on interviews with representatives from 67 Food Policy Networks to provide a globally comparative perspective of Food Policy Networks and their impacts along the policy cycle. By utilising a policy cycle perspective and by drawing on diverse global approaches, this paper opens new discussions around power, tools and policies that Food Policy Networks

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed the emergence of a “food system transformation” (FST) agenda within academic and policy discourses, which raise the need for systemic analyses that identify concrete leverages for structural change (Béné and Abdulai, 2024; ANON 8). Despite disagreements about what exactly constitutes transformation, scholars concur that the FST agenda lacks “directionality” – that is, “a set of governing tools and procedures to enable broad agreement on a future direction and effective vision towards a sustainable food system” (Kugelberg et al., 2021: 2). Ongoing efforts to make food system governance more effective have emphasised the importance of creating opportunities for participation and the co-production of knowledge amongst different epistemic communities of food system actors, including, in particular, marginalised voices. Indeed, for many scholars FST is fundamentally a re-orientation of power imbalances (Discetti and Acuti, 2025) – or, as defined by Patterson et al. (2017), a “process of radical change in the structural, functional, and relational aspects of the food system that leads to more just socio-ecological relationships, patterns of interactions and outcomes” (see also ANON 7).

In theory, multi-actor collaborations (such as food policy councils and food partnerships) embody all central tenets of the FST agenda. Focused on issues such as food poverty, environmental sustainability, indigenous rights and more, these collaborative initiatives utilise a “systemic” or cross-sectoral approach (Levkoe et al., 2021: 51) to overcome the siloes created by fragmented national food policy approaches (Sadler et al., 2015: 1104). They also embrace participatory governance characteristics, seeking to build relationships through collaboration, establish shared understandings between diverse actors and explore strategies to enhance social and environmental justice (Sanz Sanz et al., 2023; ANON 5).

Despite widespread assumptions about the democratic potential of collaborative governance arrangements, a significant research gap persists regarding their capacity to catalyse change (Clayton et al., 2015; Santo and Moragues-Faus, 2019; Rao et al., 2025). Indeed, some researchers question how issues of scale, power, stability, lack of resources, diversity and cohesion experienced by collaborative initiatives can weaken their outcomes (Gupta et al., 2018; Michel et al., 2022). Others wonder whether their strategies are truly transformative or instead “regressive”, potentially reinforcing existing power dynamics (Wolpold-Bosien, 2023).

To enhance understanding of the transformative potential of collaborative governance mechanisms, there is a need for research that empirically examines their relationship with food policy. As some scholars stress, the capacity to drive structural change (rather than performing isolated, issue-specific interventions) is ultimately tied to the ability to engage

with and shape food policy (Candel, 2022; Clark et al., 2021). Although collaborative governance arrangements are assumed to increase the quality and legitimacy of food policymaking, empirical support for this claim is lacking (Candel, 2022; Steyaert et al., 2025; Zerbian et al., 2024).

To fill this gap, in this paper we adopt the all-encompassing expression of “food policy networks” (FPNs) to explore the contribution of multi-actor governance arrangements to transformative food policies (ANON 2; 3; 6). Acknowledging the complexity of the relationship between policy networks and policy outcomes (Marsh and Smith, 2000: 11), we apply a policy cycle approach to deepen understandings of the role and deployment of policy in and by FPNs from North and South America, Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Such an approach creates an indicative framework from which to organise actions that have not been analysed before, providing an entry point to review the diverse actions of a global span of complex networks that have not yet been studied at such scope. To better understand if and to what extent these interventions advance FST, we selected and interviewed 67 FPNs that differ significantly in terms of scale, regional representation, size and maturity. The global diversity of data addresses comments made by scholars about the lack of comparative studies examining the transformative power of FPNs (Discetti and Acuti 2024; Michel et al. 2022; Santo and Moragues-Faus 2019). At the same time, the geographical spread of our dataset widens perspectives in existing studies that predominantly focus on the Anglo-Saxon (and, to a lesser extent, the Global North and European) contexts (Andrée et al., 2019).

Researching the power and policy dimension of food system transformation

The power of FPNs to influence change is acknowledged within urban food governance literature (ANON 9). For example, Moragues-Faus (2020) explores how food partnerships in the UK (re)shape agencies and relationships in their urban foodscapes by mobilising principles (equality, participation and inclusion) and practice (coproduction, values and reflexivity). In their investigation of a food policy council in Valencia, Zerbian et al. (2023) raise the need for a “longitudinal and cross-scale assessment of power dynamics” that considers their diversity and recognise their equal significance in the governance of urban transitions (p. 10).

Other scholars have approached FST using the multi-level perspective model (El Bilali, 2019; Gaitán-Cremaschi et al., 2019; Hinrichs, 2014; Meynard et al., 2017), which acknowledges three levels through which change happens: niche (the micro-level where novelties emerge), regime (interrelated domains that stabilise an existing system) and landscape levels (environmental pressures on the existing regime). Policy and power are implicit across all three levels: policy can crystallise in different types on all levels, but for transformation to happen, the niche level must challenge the power of dominant regimes (Geels, 2011; Geels and Schot, 2007). Policy literature also offers the concept of “policy windows” described by Kingdom (2010), as when policy streams – defined as problems, policy and politics – align to enable policy change to happen. Ilieva et al. (2023) apply both the multi-level perspective and the multiple streams framework to food policymaking during the COVID-19 pandemic in New York City.

The literature on FST also emphasises the role of policy instruments to facilitate change. Some scholars utilise the Hood's NATO model (1983), which classifies types of policy tools from the position of the core governing body. For example, in his review of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP) signatory cities' food strategies, Candel (2020: 940) concludes that "governments use very diverse instrument mixes, whereby authority-based instruments are less common". Likewise, Sibbing et al. (2021: 66) show that although numerous policy tools are deployed in municipalities in the Netherlands, it is yet to be determined whether food policy integration occurs in practice. Finally, Dagevos and Onwezen (2025) take a "toolbox approach" to provide a continuum from "hard" (restrictive and/or assertive) to "soft" (non-invasive or mild) policy instruments.

A few scholars have engaged with concepts of policy levers and leverage points to identify food policy interventions towards FST (Halliday, 2019; Parsons et al., 2021; Sievert et al., 2025). Within this literature, FPNs have been portrayed as one such intervention (den Boer et al. 2023; ANON 8). Food democracy literature, in particular, often depicts FPNs as *empowering* in their capacity to connect the lived experience of individual citizens with broader social-structural phenomena (Allen, 2008: 167; see also Zerbian et al., 2023). Den Boer et al. (2023: 11) consider FPNs as "systemic transition intermediaries" that disrupt dominant socio-technical configurations through the creation of new collaborations within and across technological, ideological and market-based domains (Kivimaa et al., 2019). This interpretation of food policy, which rarely goes beyond policy tools, outputs or the dominant perspective of government, reflects a tendency in the literature to neglect an empirical focus on FPNs' influence on policy trajectories. As Sibbing et al. (2021: 66) point out, "research needs to be extended from outputs to outcomes to evaluate the actual effects of food policy in society". As yet, FPNs' engagement with food policy has not been thoroughly approached and, where it has, it lacks a comparative basis.

Understanding the power of FPNs through a policy cycle approach

A policy cycle approach can provide a structured framework to analyse how FPNs strive to influence and transform food system dynamics, especially if it considers the ways in which power relations between actors shape the degree and direction of change. Indeed, FPNs often need to exude power both over external and internal forces, such as when other coalitions may be vying for specific outcomes (Swinnen and Resnick, 2023) or where powerful groups may mobilising to prevent change from happening (Grin, 2012).

In theory, three main forms of power capture the multiple ways FPNs can influence the food policy process (Clapp and Fuchs, 2009). *Structural power*, which refers to "the influence of actors based on their economic position, institutional access, and ability to shape policy agendas" (Phulkerd et al., 2022: 1; see also Clapp and Fuchs, 2009), can "build the table' for decision-making" (Andrée et al., 2019: 27); to gain structural power, FPNs would need to develop some form of co-governance or self-governance" (ibid). *Instrumental power*, which involves strategies used to influence policy decisions (such as lobbying and advocacy), would require FPNs to strategically apply resources and skills to achieve their goals (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Phulkerd et al., 2022). *Discursive power* refers to the ability of

actors to shape narratives, frame issues, establish norms and, hence, influence public opinion (Cheyns and Riisgaard, 2014; Clapp and Fuchs, 2009; McKeon, 2017)¹.

When researching FPNs, we find this tripartite framework particularly useful, since it aligns closely with the multi-level, participatory nature of FPNs. Other purely economic, rational or coercive approaches would risk underestimating the role of narrative framing and legitimacy in shaping policy outcomes, as well as the “messiness” of policy change – all of which are considered central to transformative food system governance (Candel, 2022; den Boer et al., 2023; Leeuwis et al., 2021).

Mapping FPNs’ power to engage along the food policy cycle

A review of existing literature shows that FPNs’ engagement along the food policy cycle ranges from “pre-policy processes” through to stages of “policy engagement and levers”, “policy documentation” and “post-policy enforcement actions” (figure 1). Pre-policy processes encompass activities that shape problem definitions, frame policy issues and set agendas before formal policy discussions begin. For example, this phase relates to FPNs’ efforts to raise public awareness for the need for FST and inspire action through activities that promote knowledge-exchange and collaboration. Hood’s information tools, such as providing *information* to citizens, *monitoring and evaluating* the effects of interventions, performing *research*, exchanging knowledge through *conferences and workshops*, (co-)developing *education* programs, taking an active *brokering or lobbying* role in governance networks, *mapping* and *labelling* (Candel 2020: 938), may also be found in this stage (Schiff, 2008).

The pre-policy stage can also include “policy placement”, or how FPNs consider their positioning in relation to decision-makers. While for some scholars placement conveys authority, visibility, legitimacy or accessibility by creating more inclusive pathways for diverse policy representation (Ambrose et al., 2022; Clayton et al., 2015; Porter and Ashcraft, 2020), others acknowledge that being situated with/within government can hamper FPNs efforts, for example by constraining collaboration with external stakeholders (Siddiki et al., 2015).

Policy engagement and levers refer to direct participation in policy development through the application of policy tools that support advocacy, lobbying and coalition-building (Court et al., 2006). Policy tools – which can also be recognised as “levers”² – encompass “action plans, strategies, framework legislation, statutes, bills, laws, court decisions, licensing, approvals, directives, regulations, guidelines, standards, codes of practice, specific programmes or voluntary initiatives” (Hawkes and Parsons 2019: 2). Examples from Hood’s financial and regulation instruments may be indicative of this stage whilst also contributing to the next, depending on their degree of formalisation. Financial tools that FPNs may

¹ Andree et al. (2019), among others, recognise also *constitutive power* – a foundational power that creates the rules and beliefs that underpin societal structures, such as institutions, laws and roles. Since this type of power is far beyond the scope and remit of participatory governance arrangements, in this paper we focus only on structural, instrumental and discursive power.

² “Leverage points” differ to levers, as they refer to locations, rather than means, of change in socio-ecological systems (Chan et al., 2020).

deploy include grants and subsidies alongside indirect financial support such as access to land, food and awards schemes (Candel, 2020).

Policy documentation – akin to what others call “policy outputs” (for example, legislation) – involves the formalisation of policies through drafting, consultation and official adoption processes (Knill and Tosun, 2012). Drawing on Hood’s regulation criteria, Candel (2020) provides examples of rules, requirements and guidelines, ranging in rigidity from nutritional guidelines, through to rules and regulations for animal husbandry, vending, garden preservation or food price regulation, as well as agreements, such as assigning ambassadors, providing seeds or organising subsidised markets.

Finally, post-policy enforcement covers implementation, monitoring and evaluation activities that ensure policies are translated into practice and inform future reforms (Edelman and Albrecht, 2023). This stage insists on holding government officials to account for policy, recounting acts of resistance and resilience by food system actors to ensure ongoing reflection, adaptation and improvement of food policy (Laforge et al., 2017: 677).

Despite some attention for the strategies deployed by FPNs to transform the food system, to date the literature has not provided comparative analyses of the implications of FPNs’ engagement with food policy. To address this gap, we ask: to what extent are FPNs impacting change along the policy cycle? Where are FPNs positioning themselves in relation to decision-makers? What forms of policy documentation are FPNs producing to influence food policy? What are post-policy considerations for FPNs? More broadly: how and to what extent do FPNs contribute to FST, and what type and degree of power do they experience and deploy?

Figure 1: Analytical framework for the FPN policy cycle (own creation)

Methodology

The research used a qualitative approach, based on semi-structured interviews, to explore the goals, roles, structures, networks and transformative actions of FPNs. A review of scientific and grey literature (using Scopus, Google Scholar and Web of Science) was first conducted to map FPNs globally, using search terms that reflected linguistic variations. The initial internet search (and subsequent interviews), which was conducted by twelve project team members in English, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, German, Portuguese and French, found over 100 FPNs from across North and South America, Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Interviewers were all strongly associated with an international research project that provided a strong conceptual framework in approach and goals. To ensure consistency of data collection, an interview template was provided to all members, which included a space to take notes on language approaches and terminology. Regular meetings with team members were held during the data collection period to discuss outcomes and refine approaches as necessary.

The initial results from the literature review were refined by excluding FPNs that lacked direct policy engagement, sufficient data or were temporary. The resulting selection of FPNs

ranged in scale³, regional representation⁴, size and maturity. The data included FPNs that are both grassroots and government-led, ranging in placement from being “within” and “outside” government institutions.

The 67 FPNs included in the research sample participated in online interviews (using Zoom or MS Teams) that were conducted between September 2023 and March 2024. One individual from each organisation was interviewed, using selection criteria that prioritised sustained engagement in the organisation. We recognise that a possible bias from this sample could result from relying on only one network representative in each case. However, we argue that this is tempered by the breadth of FPNs that were interviewed and the analysis of documentary material generated by, and written with respect to, each FPN. Each interview was approximately one-hour long, audio-recorded and transcribed and, when required, translated into English by the researchers to facilitate comparative analysis.

Interview transcripts were analysed using both deductive and inductive coding approaches (Saldana, 2009). First-level deductive coding was undertaken by the research team, who recorded the key responses for each interview question in a word document. Second-level inductive coding involved drawing out themes from the transcripts by the lead interviewer, who coded details such as types of relationships and the use of policy tools. Ethics approval was obtained for this research in accordance with the standards of the lead University, with informed consent provided by all participants.

Findings

To address the research questions, data from the interviews are grouped around four themes: FPNs’ engagement with the policy cycle; their placement in relation to policymakers; the policy tools utilised to pursue FST; and issues related to post-policy enforcement.

FPNs’ engagement with the policy cycle

As Table 1 illustrates, most FPNs operate in the pre-policy phase, prioritising trust and relationship building, organisational efforts, access to resources and priority setting.

Table 1: FPN interventions along the policy cycle (own creation)

Pre-policy processes	Policy engagement and levers	Policy documentation	Post-policy actions
To gain and/or share information, knowledge To gain access to and/or to provide resources To develop a group identity, solidarity and common goals	Choosing placement to government with respect to being: Within	Plans Strategies Memoranda of understanding Ordinances Policy	Follow up and enforce From policy to action Policy integration across departments Consolidation of policy actions

³ international (3), continental (2), national (16), regional (2), city-regional (43) and urban (1)

⁴ representing regions of north America (5), central and south America (7), Australia and New Zealand (5), UK and Ireland (9), Asia (4), Africa (6), western Europe (2), central Europe (7), Mediterranean Europe (12) and northern Europe (7)

To develop organisational stability To experiment locally To undertake projects and programs	Outside In between	Charters Resolution	
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Rather than aiming directly for policy impact, some FPNs seek more accessible wins, such as “trying to inspire people, as influencing people is more difficult” (Harleem Food Future). Strategies include targeting public awareness through prompting self-reflection of consumption choices, experimenting with alternative foods and promoting greater socioeconomic equity by offering lower priced healthy options (Ghent).

Some FPNs use this phase to collect evidence that can support policymaking. Examples include the Cork Food Policy Council (Ireland), which started a food map; ShefFood (England), which aims to undertake research in community kitchens; and the UK Sustainable Food Places Network, which drew on achievements from their more than 100 food partnerships to form a collective database. In their map, the Cork Food Policy Council explicitly acknowledged the need for systems thinking, which, in turn, illuminated next steps towards greater change: “When we realised the green space is for growing, there wasn't enough, and we invested in that [...] to demonstrate how you can do” (Cork Food Policy Council, Ireland). Hence, knowledge contributions from FPNs are personal, relational and plural, taking on many diverse forms while uniting diverse voices.

Finally, many FPNs are communicating their shared objectives by hosting public events, stakeholder meetings and awareness campaigns that reflect attempts to build legitimacy and consensus for change. For example, the Food Forum Bern (Switzerland) expresses: “we can perhaps introduce new methods or build bridges, create consistency and of course also raise awareness with our events [...] to somehow also incorporate scientific findings.

At the pre-policy phase, discursive power is key to shape understandings of what a future food system could look like across members and for the public and policymakers, particularly in contexts where no policy framework exists (such as Mexico) where FPNs must justify the very need for food policy. As commented by the coordinator of Edible Canterbury: “I don't think we can achieve the big policy things unless we have groundswell. So we need to build groundswell” (Edible Canterbury, New Zealand).

FPNs placement to decision-makers

The findings extend policy placement from the geographical location of where an FPN sits in relation to government to consider the tools that help position FPNs in decision-making processes. Twelve FPNs were based “inside” government, such as being physically placed, initiated or led by government bodies, where almost all were placed at the local government level. Examples included Biostädte Netzwerk (Germany), which is housed within and receives funding from the city government with additional resources sourced from federal government or individual states; Mesa de Coordinación del Pacto de Milán, Córdoba (Spain), which choose to sit inside the Town Hall to facilitate collaboration with the administration; and Politique Agricole et Alimentaire Comunale de Plessé (France), which represents an official municipal policy with the leadership held by the municipality in dialogue with civil society.

Although being placed within government is often expected to provide greater security and political influence, this is not always the case. The Greater Manchester Food Security Action Network (England) explained that “sometimes that can slow things down” whereas, on the positive side, “they do have very close links to local authorities and to Greater Manchester”, which can help catalyse change. Clearly, although placement does not directly determine political outcomes, it can help to steer them.

Some FPNs question the degree of policy engagement at the local level, as stated by the representative of Red de Municipios por la Agroecología (Spain): “most of the food policies that the municipalities [...] are doing, personally, are very soft. First of all, they are neither transforming the food system, nor are they helping people to have a better right to healthy and sustainable food, nor are they improving people's diets. They are very half-hearted actions with very little budget”. They argue that, instead, they “could show the colours of the politicians who are responsible for saying, you talk about this, but you don't dedicate resources to it”.

At times, FPNs also engage at the state, national or even continental government levels. For example, Sustain (Australia) discussed their participation in a parliamentary inquiry in the state of Victoria, where they hope that such “a transparent, open mechanism” would in turn put “pressure and expectation on the government to actually [...] respond in a substantive way”.

While the “outside” category also proved to be on a continuum for FPNs that desired to remain external to government influence, three FPNs in particular sat resolutely “outside” government. An example of counter-government approach was offered by Grupo Interinstitucional de Paisajes Alimentarios Sostenibles (Nicaragua), where the FPN's independence was due to “a political mandate [that] there cannot be a relationship between state institutions and this type of initiative”. Teia dos Povos (Brazil) also expressed how being apart from government was intricately connected to their identity and purpose:

For us, the state is a three-legged monster that only moves by pushing. So, when we want something, we fight, organise and lobby the state so that it can solve our problem. We don't have a relationship with state governments, we don't participate in government discussions without a purpose, without our own construction. We strive for autonomy, where we achieve everything in the process of struggle.

These two categories – of being “in” or “out” of government – proved to be extreme examples; indeed, the majority of FPNs exist “in between”. For example, some FPNs were instigated by government (Health Savanna, USA), others included government staff (FLACK, Africa) and others had temporary or specific government involvement, such as the provision of funding or space (Food Fairness Illawarra, Australia). Funding is a key factor that often binds FPNs to government. For example, a Food Resilience Coordinator is paid for by council for Our Food Network Dunedin (New Zealand) but the network sits outside council. Alternatively, Alimentar Cidades Sustentáveis (Portugal) provides services to the government “because it's a way of sustaining the network”. However, at times lack of resources also extends to municipal government; as experienced by Greater Manchester's FPN, “[t]here's no budget supplied by us ...it's very much based on the willingness and goodwill of network

members". In some cases, FPNs "win" independence by securing contracts and grants, as evidenced by the Open Food Network (Australia), Nourish Scotland and others.

Negotiating access to decision-making is performed by utilising a wide range of policy tools (Table 2), which help build relationships with decision-makers and influence policy agendas.

Figure 2: Examples of the continuum of FPN policy tools and actions for engaging policy (own creation)

Policy tools vary across the policy cycle. At the local government level, they include aligning policy with specific discourses such as the "right to food" (Islington Food Partnership, England), incentivising urban agriculture projects (Bergamo Food Policy, Italy), getting an exemption for small scale abattoirs (Australian Food Sovereignty Network, Australia), removing restrictions on activities such as keeping livestock (Denver Sustainable Food Policy Council, USA), prohibiting actions such as "no more spraying of public parks" (Cork Food Policy Council, Ireland) or implementing a sugar tax (Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, Australia).

Some strategies rely on the influence of an individual as a broker and enforcer. For example, the Ghent Food Policy Council (Belgium) spoke about an alderwoman who "tries to keep the relationship transparent and tries to communicate with the municipal government". Likewise, the Chicago Food Policy Action Council (USA) has a member within council: "So, we have Bill⁵, who's now based in the [...] mayor's office. [...] So, he actually has a lot better access to all these departments and agencies than we had before, and can help bring them together, have consistent meetings with them, make sure they're meeting their targets".

FPNs sitting outside government employ diverse strategies to influence policy. For example, Food Secure Canada enables civil society to speak directly to the Government of Canada. ShefFood (England) believes that being outside government allows them to be a "kind of like a broker in many situations, from community growers to food banks to catering managers to the school food people". Alternatively, the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance self-defined as "radicals and reformists", explaining how FST requires both "transformational change on the ground, growing things and operating in noncapitalist ways amongst communities that are just refusing the system as much as we possibly can inside a capitalist system" and "reforming the structures that are disabling that transformation".

Once commitment is publicly endorsed, many FPNs stress that it is instrumental to have this in writing. Towards this goal, Ceinture Aliment-Terre Liègeoise (Belgium) described how they publish memorandum with the aim of giving specific recommendations for policymakers, and from which each working group can reflect on their work to attain a specific result.

Policy documentation is much less prolific than actions in the pre-policy phase. The analysis reveal plans, strategies, memoranda of understanding (MOU), ordinances, policies, charters and resolutions that are associated with varied government departments, including

⁵ A pseudonym is used here to protect anonymity.

development, health, spatial planning, wellbeing, nutrition, safety, zero carbon and catering (Table 2).

Table 2: Policy documentation deployed by FPNs (own creation)

Form of policy documentation	Themes	Example
<i>Plans</i>	Development Spatial planning Nutrition Sustainability	Local development plans (Lusaka Food Policy Council, Zambia) District Nutrition Action Plan (Uganda Food Change Lab, Uganda) Zoning (planning) (Uganda Food Change Lab) The Christchurch City Council Healthy Food Plan (Edible Canterbury, New Zealand) Sustainable Food Plan (Bwyd Abtawe, Wales)
<i>Strategies</i>	Food justice Indigenous rights	Food system strategies (Food Liaison Advisory Council, Kenya; Sustain Australia), including a black food sovereignty food strategy in Toronto (Food Secure Canada, Canada)
<i>MOUs</i>	Legal	Legal recognition through an MOU (Mbale Good Food Council and Parliament, Uganda)
<i>Ordinances</i>	Health and safety	Ordinances (Healthy Savannah, USA)
<i>Policy</i>	Food safety Zero carbon Wellbeing School catering	Food safety (Nutrition in City Ecosystems, Bangladesh, Kenya and Rwanda; Mbale Good Food Council and Parliament, Uganda; Uganda Food Change Lab, Uganda; Programa de Sistemas Alimentarios Sostenibles, Peru) Zero carbon policy (Our Food Network Dunedin, New Zealand) Wellbeing policy (Our Food Network Dunedin, New Zealand) School catering policies (Ernährungsrat Oldenburg, Germany)
<i>Charters</i>	Good food	Good Food Charters (Our Food Network Dunedin, New Zealand)
<i>Resolution</i>	Legal	Good Food Nation Act (Nourish Scotland, Scotland)

Policy documents vary in type across different scales. At the regional level, examples include the Regional Food Strategy from Food Fairness Illawarra (Australia), a five-year plan to coordinate local food system action across three councils. At the national level, significant policy documents include the “Peoples’ Food Plan” (Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, launched in 2013 and revised in 2023), “Resetting the Table: A People’s Food Policy for Canada” (Food Secure Canada, launched in 2011) and the “Good Food Nation Act” (Nourish Scotland, published in 2022) – all of which demonstrate significant co-sector and multi-level government participation in the drafting process. For example, “Resetting the Table” (Food Secure Canada, 2011) resulted from a lengthy process that involved ten policy discussion papers, 350 Kitchen Table Talks, hundreds of policy submissions, dozens of tele-conferences, online discussions and three cross-Canada conferences.

The final stage of the FPN policy cycle involves the continual strengthening and deepening of food policy outcomes through sustained implementation, cross-sectoral integration and reflection. At the local level, FPNs often emphasise the need for active follow-up to ensure that policies are carried out in practice. As the Mbale Good Food Council and Parliament (Uganda) explains, “[p]ersistent follow-up ensures adoption of proposals in parliamentary committee reports and allocation of funds”. Similarly, Our Food Network Dunedin (New Zealand) stresses that there is a need for “to engage with council and remind them that, you said you were going to do this and this is how paying attention to food might advance some of the objectives that you have under those policies”. These examples illustrate how

instrumental power is exercised through concrete actions to secure resources and policy compliance.

Beyond enforcement, many FPNs also work to embed FST into broader governance structures. Locally, this includes integrating FST goals into municipal planning documents (Nutrire Trento, Italy), local area plans (Lusaka Food Policy Council, Zambia) and catering and procurement food strategies (ShefFood, England). At the national scale, the Scottish Food Coalition seeks to establish “an executive education programme in food systems” (Scottish Food Coalition) that provides an example of structural power to institutionalise knowledge and coordination mechanisms.

Alternatively, some FPNs focus on deepening work on specific parts of the food system. For example, the Grupo Interinstitucional de Paisajes Alimentarios Sostenibles (Nicaragua) aims to work with consumers, while the Denver Sustainable Food Policy Council (USA) seeks “to encourage plant-based meals as the default option” and ShefFood (England) aspires to influencing hospital procurement as a long-term goal. These initiatives often rely on discursive power to reframe food narratives – shaping public debate around health, sustainability and cultural norms.

Continued collaborations are also considered essential – both to strengthen current policy and to initiate new ones. The Uganda Food Change Lab, for example, calls for “further collaboration with national-level platforms to influence broader policy changes and promote sustainable practices”, while the Good Food Fund (China) highlights the role of the MUFPP in linking local strategies to international networks. Edible Canterbury (New Zealand) seeks to broaden engagement by involving “the big guys like the supermarket chains and the big farmers”, showing how instrumental power is mobilised through new partnerships.

Mature (and often national) FPNs reflect a growing trend for diversification of food policies to better represent diverse voices within their constituencies. In line with a decolonisation agenda, Food Secure Canada and the San Diego Food Alliance (USA) are witnessing the emergence of both black and indigenous food movements. The need to acknowledge this enhanced cultural diversity is reflected within the internal structures and compositions of FPNs, as demonstrated by both Food Secure Canada and the San Diego Food Alliance (USA). These initiatives reflect both discursive and structural power, as FPNs challenge dominant narratives and reconfigure internal governance structures to include historically marginalised voices.

Finally, larger-scale FPNs, such as Food Secure Canada (national), Good Food Good Farming (Europe) and the C40 Cities’ Climate Leadership Group (global), have distinct roles in setting aspirations and expectations across their networks. They aim to overcome fragmentation, foster solidarity through knowledge-sharing and use their ability to both influence “up” – for example, to drive structural transformation – and “down” – by establishing membership requirements to instil cohesive change among their members. In addition to deepening engagement, they seek to broaden the impact of food policy. For example, C40 utilises two delivery mechanisms: the first entails “using the peer-to-peer to peer exchange and convening cities in ... workshops, webinars, discussions where we really lever the inspirational element to try to bring new cities on a specific policy, a specific way of thinking

or plan”; the second involves fundraising, “and we go on the ground with extra support, vertical support, on specific cities with specific funds to deliver specific policies”.

Many FPNs acknowledge the challenges involved in measuring impact. Good Food Good Farming (Europe) reflected on CAP reform efforts: “if you just measure the hard facts, like how the policies are, I would have to say we were unsuccessful”. Good Food Good Farming acknowledged how they “played a big role in informing people, strengthening efforts of single organisations, bringing them together, creating a common voice. But again, it’s frustrating that you don’t see the impacts reflected in the policy”. Being able to withstand failure is an essential skill for an FPN. For example, Good Food Good Farming expressed: “[The] CAP, pesticide reform and sustainable food system framework, all three of them have not made it. Either they were stopped, or the political efforts were stopped completely, proposals were withdrawn and the CAP reform ... did not live up to our expectation”. This quote underscores the difficulty of capturing transformative change when much of the influence occurs indirectly (through ideas, coalitions and public narratives), rather than as immediate legislative victories.

At the post-policy phase, structural power is critical for horizontal and vertical governance integration, since FPNs often lack of resources or authority to implement policies alone. Here, structural power is often gained through FPNs’ alignment with other similar FPNs. Membership in trans-local networks, such as C40 or the MUFPP, or international organisations, such as Rikolto, enable scaling across governance levels, while some FPNs, such as the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, pursue systemic reforms, such as campaigns for universal income to address structural food inequalities.

Discussion

None of the FPNs included in this research has managed, on its own, to combine different types of power and bring about a radical transformation of the dynamics that permeate food systems. In this respect, our study confirms existing insights into the limited transformational capacity of collaborative governance, which all too often rests upon fragile arrangements that appear disconnected from one another in terms of goals, composition and positionality. However, our study highlights the combined transformative potential of FPNs. Taken together, they offer a diversity of context-specific constellations of actions, placement, leverage points and types of power along the policy cycle, which shed light onto the “how” of FST – that is, the multiple pathways through which transformative dynamics and goals are or can be negotiated.

Our findings show that FPNs reside foremost in the pre-policy phase of the policy cycle, placing most effort into information sharing, alliance building, experimentation and organisational consolidation. This finding accords with Leeuwis et al. (2021) who recognise “transformation as a non-linear and long-term process of competition, negotiation and reconfiguration” (p. 761). By empowering community members to engage in food systems and by building political will for systemic policy change, FPNs strive “to create democratic spaces for convergence in diversity” (Harper, et al., 2009: 7). While this initial phase is essential for building the capacity of FPNs, the actions of some FPNs also suggest alternative transition pathways. For example, to reach its goals Chicago prioritised *internal* institutional

transformation (in the leadership, design and process of the organisation) over and above external FST goals.

While it is acknowledged that barriers of limited administrative capacities, scarce data and lack of prioritisation of food in the municipal agenda may limit FPNs' impact, the adequacy of the types of knowledge that are being conveyed to policymakers also need to be considered. For example, recognising a shift in preference towards evidence-based policy, more attention could be paid to what types of information FPNs need to produce to garner policymakers' attention (Zerbian et al., 2024). Furthermore, our findings demonstrate that the integration of grassroots' actions into policy does not follow a singular pathway; strategic partnerships could be further diversified and developed to identify new actors to carry FPNs' message into policy forums, such as academic conferences and policy conventions⁶.

Regarding policy placement, while the findings reveal that the physical location and tools used by FPNs support greater engagement with policymakers, the degree to which change happens can be influenced by many factors. First, local government may not have adequate power to enact change. For example, while New York's mayor has regulatory powers to restrict trans fats and calorie labelling (Libman, 2015), London's mayor has no legislative power, relying on conducive policies and voluntary measures at the borough level (Halliday, 2015). Another factor that may reflect FPNs' ability to instigate change is its symbolic distance from the dominant regime; as described by Leeuwis et al. (2021: 770), groups such as La Via Campesina tend to be either marginalised or neutralised (through absorption) by the dominant regime.

Our analysis also highlights the importance of placement that can go beyond immediate locations within municipalities to extend to FPNs' strategic positioning and enable them to influence broader governance arenas. For example, this research shows that FPNs are placing themselves in positions to understand and influence local processes (as demonstrated by 'Bill' from the Chicago Food Policy Action Council); to influence mayors to galvanise change (C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group); and to form a "network of networks" (Andrée et al., 2019: 8) to empower marginalised voices to be heard on a global scale (La Via Campesina). Each action wields power (be it structural, instrumental or discursive), with FPNs drawing models, experiences and needs from their place-based frames to influence broader governance and policy change.

Our findings also show that FPNs produce few legally binding policy documents. However, a cross-country comparison (see Table 3 above) confirms Leeuwis et al's (2021: 773) "specific entry points for change" in areas of development, spatial planning, nutrition, sustainability, food justice, indigenous rights, health and (food) safety, zero carbon, wellbeing and school catering – all of which could be used for models to be applied elsewhere. Finally, interviews from mature FPNs, such as Food Secure Canada, show that dedicated resources for ongoing reflection, evaluation and monitoring of their policy achievements are essential into the future.

⁶ See Lang and Mason (2017), who discuss an example of integrating sustainable diets into policy.

With regard to FST, the analysis confirms Andrée et al. (2019)'s point that not all FPNs desire the same outcomes. While some FPNs seek to engage with policy to impact structural change, others prefer more immediate and/or "softer" and less confrontational forms of influence and indirect policy activities, such as problem identification and food education (see also Dailey et al., 2022). Furthermore, while many FPNs in this research sit in the middle seeking co-governance approaches, others (for example, Teia dos Povos in Brazil) tip towards self-governance goals.

In this respect, our results demonstrate that different types of power are predominant along the policy cycle -- ie., discursive power in the pre-policy phase, when FPNs emerge and need to achieve some internal consensus and external legitimacy through the articulation of a clear vision and goals for the future. Instrumental power is often exercised during the implementation stage, if and when an FPNs acquires the financial and cultural capital that is necessary to influence policy decisions. Structural power is far more difficult to gain for individual FPNs. In our research, there are scant examples at the post-policy stage, when established FPNs (such as Food Secure Canada or La Via Campesina) create alliances or alignments between complementary agendas.

This study also uncovers a rich diversity of multi-dimensional approaches to power within these stages. Across our cases, FPNs differ not only in governance scale (from hyperlocal neighbourhood initiatives to transnational networks) but also in policy focus (for example, food access, procurement, land use, health) and strategic orientation (advocacy, technical expertise, policy design, direct implementation). Some FPNs emphasise local experimentation, while others, such as C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, set aspirations across entire regions or nations, using their influence both "up" to drive structural reforms and "down" to align member actions. This multi-dimensionality enables FPNs to mobilise what Rossi et al. (2019: 147) describe as "new, diverse sources of power" that allow for co-construction and legitimisation of novel practices, institutions and policy pathways. For instance, trans-local networks such as the MUFPP amplify the structural power of local FPNs by linking them to global agendas such as climate action or sustainable development. Conversely, hyperlocal initiatives, such as Edible Canterbury, shape highly place-based food policies rooted in local knowledge and technical expertise.

This diversity of power and approaches has its risks, especially in terms of fragmentation and uneven transformative potential. Some FPNs focus primarily on immediate, pragmatic goals (for example, food access programs, procurement reforms), while others pursue long-term structural change (for example, universal basic income campaigns, systemic land use reform). FPNs also differ in their prioritisation of topics and pathways, which, in turn, determines which actors are included and which forms of knowledge, discourse or action are legitimised. Without mechanisms for strategic alignment across scales and sectors, these efforts may remain isolated, producing incremental, rather than transformative, outcomes.

The challenge, then, is to foster synergies between discursive, instrumental and structural powers across governance levels. Building connectivity among FPNs with different capacities, as suggested by Andrée et al. (2019), can enable integrated, system-wide perspectives that address not only the "what" of food policy but also the "how" and "who" of decision-making. This requires establishing and strengthening platforms for horizontal

learning across localities, vertical coordination between local, regional and national actors and cross-sectoral coalitions linking food policy to health, environment and social justice agendas.

Conclusion

By analysing literature and by bringing in the voices of diverse on FPNs along the policy cycle, this study moves beyond the conflation of “policy” (FPNs’ direct engagement with formal legislative and regulatory activities) and “advocacy” (FPNS’ work to build a food movement) to clarify where and how FPNs place their policymaking efforts. The “how” of FST is pursued through the positioning of leverage points and selection of tools, documentation and different types of power deployed along the policy cycle. The tools advocated by FPNs to progress FST are highly varied in form, audience and endurance, but those that can most uphold FST goals within policy, such as the delivery of grassroots action into bills and acts, remain lacking. Even when policy outcomes are elicited, many rely upon a FPN’s capacity to take on new opportunities.

A key challenge emerging from this study is how FPNs can move beyond fragmented or single-issue efforts to enable integration, which is not simply about linking policies; from a FST perspective, it is also about aligning actors, resources and governance processes across scales and sectors to amplify their transformative potential. Such integration needs to overcome grassroots experimentation and formal policymaking as separate spheres, positioning FPNs as bridging mechanisms that channel community knowledge, values and innovations into formal governance and policymaking processes. When successful, these processes institutionalise community-led innovations into durable policy frameworks, where successive food reports and plans can build upon one another to shape municipal agendas. Such trajectories show how discursive power at the community level can be translated into structural power at the policy level, enabling bottom-up transformation that retains grassroots legitimacy.

It is important to remember that food issues inherently cut across public health, environmental sustainability, social welfare and economic development (ANON 1). Yet, in many contexts these agendas remain institutionally and financially compartmentalised. For FPNs, pursuing FST requires engaging with interdepartmental mechanisms and reframing food policy as a lever for achieving multiple co-benefits. The risk, however, is that integration across departments can dilute focus or become overly bureaucratic – unless anchored in shared goals and concrete joint actions.

Finally, FST often requires shifts in power and coordination across local, regional, national and transnational levels. Some FPNs leverage membership in higher-tiered networks such as the MUFPP to scale local innovations upward, while others, such as the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, use local experiences to advocate for structural reforms such as universal basic income at the national level. Vertical integration also raises trade-offs and tensions: who leads the agenda – local actors with experiential knowledge or higher-level institutions with regulatory authority? How can alignment be ensured across governance levels with differing priorities, resources and political dynamics? What mechanisms enable

power to flow both upward (scaling local innovations) and downward (embedding national commitments in local practice)?

From a theoretical perspective, this paper opens discussions around forms of power, tools and policies that FPNs can deploy to achieve FST. Future research in this field will have to address three main issues. First, what factors determine why some FPNs stay in the pre-policy stage, and, relatedly, what strategies can support FPNs to reach the next stage? Second, under what circumstances do FPNs' actions reach government officials yet fail to be taken on by policymakers? Third, how can integration across FPNs be better facilitated to maximise their combined transformative potential and enable greater power across scales, placement and actions? Addressing these questions requires viewing policy integration not as a linear process but as a dynamic trajectory where power, resources and legitimacy circulate across scales, shaping opportunities for FST. By providing a globally comparative perspective of FPNs, this paper initiates a food systems policy perspective that, by highlighting how change is happening across the food system, attempts to progress holistic and diverse policy and theoretical pathways towards FST.

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ANON 6

ANON 7

ANON 8

ANON 9

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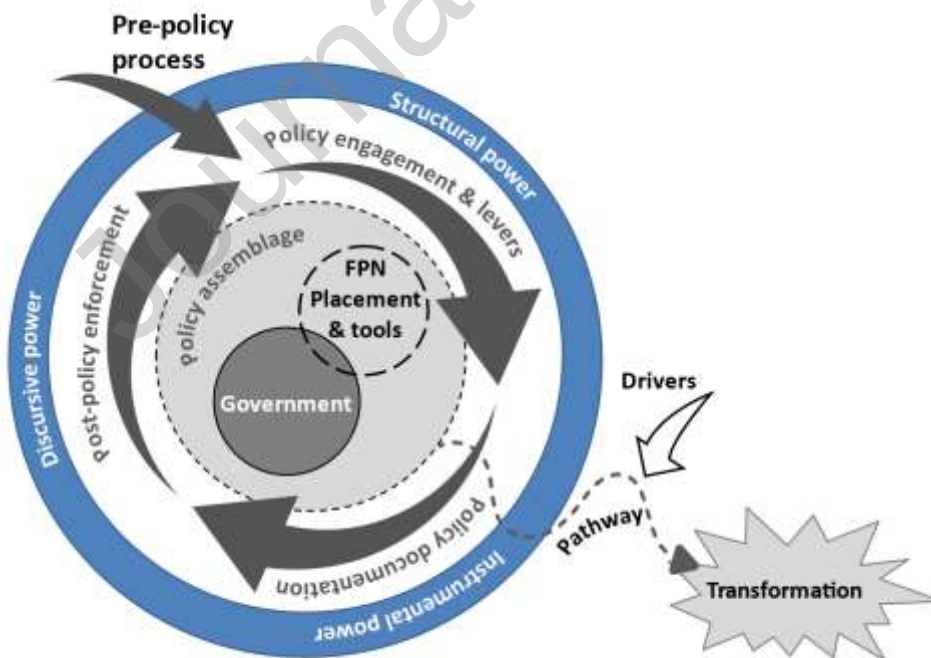
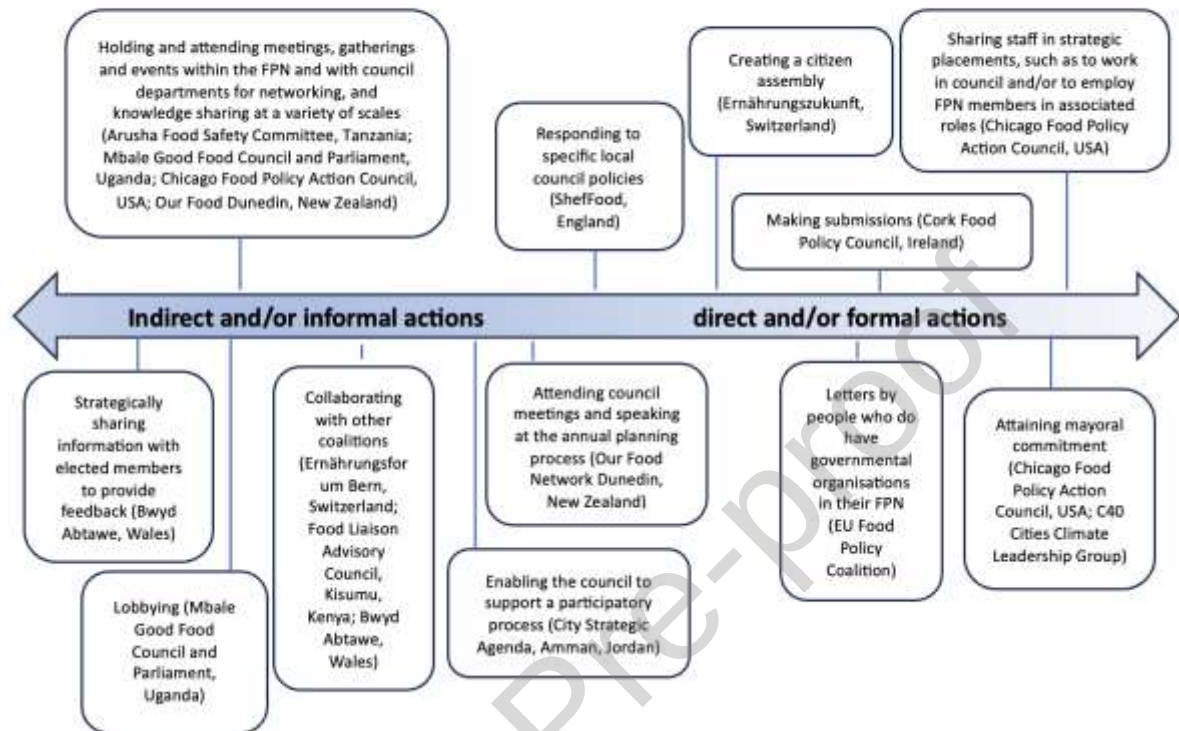


Figure 1.

Figure 2: Examples of the continuum of FPN policy tools and actions for engaging policy

(own creation)

**Figure 2.****Highlights:**

- Food policy networks focus largely on the pre-policy phase of the policy cycle.
- Food policy networks and academics understand food system transformation differently.
- The power of placement to enable food policy networks to engage with policymakers.
- Food policy networks produce few legally-binding documents along the policy cycle.
- Shifting political priorities demand enforcement, evaluation and adaptation.