
Learning About and Connecting Food Policy Entities in Washington State:

**An Effort of the Washington State Conservation
Commission, Washington State Department of
Agriculture, and Washington State Food Policy Forum.**

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Note from the authors:

While this work was requested by the Washington State Food Policy Forum, study design and execution were carried out by the authors without direct involvement from the Food Policy Forum or its convening agencies. This report and its recommendations represent the findings and syntheses of the authors, and not necessarily the views of the Food Policy Forum as a whole.

Washington Food Policy Entity Report Executive Summary

Background

Food policy groups (FPGs), which typically include councils, networks, and coalitions, are collaborative bodies that bring together diverse stakeholders from various sectors to address local and regional food system challenges. The importance and presence of food policy groups have been steadily growing in recent years, driven by increasing awareness of food system issues and the need for coordinated action. The Washington State Food Policy Forum, co-convened by the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC) and the Washington State Department of Agriculture, identified food policy councils as a 2024 area for exploration and contracted with the University of Washington Food Systems, Nutrition, and Health (UW FSNH) Research Team to address two key research question areas: 1) what is the scope of local food policy entity activity in Washington, and 2) what is the nature of perspectives on needs and opportunities regarding coordination?

Methods

To address these questions, the UW FSNH research team conducted interviews and surveys with members of Washington State food policy entities to learn about their activities, needs, and opportunities. The interviews and surveys targeted 25 organizations that fell into our definition of food policy entity (FPE). These organizations were identified through a list shared from the SCC, prior connections with the research team, a web search, and snowball sampling. FPEs were interviewed about FPE group characteristics, FPE activities, and perceived challenges, needs, and opportunities related to coordination and collaboration. Interviews were conducted on zoom with 17 of the 25 FPEs we contacted, of which 15 were found to meet our definition of a FPE. Fourteen of those participated in a follow-up online survey. Survey questions related to key FPE characteristics (e.g., budget, organization type, membership, geographic focus area, connections to government, presence and types of working groups) and took a more systematic approach to asking about activities in which FPEs were engaged; resources, skills, and information that FPEs received and needed; and, asked FPEs to rank preferred forms and communication modes for collaboration.

Key Findings Regarding Food Policy Entity Activity in Washington

Participant Background and Roles

- ◇ Most participants had been either with their specific organization or otherwise working in food systems in Washington for ten or more years. Of those that were newer to food systems, most were coming from a public health and governmental policy background.
- ◇ A significant portion of those interviewed seemed to be in a position as the singular member allowing their respective group to function, either as the sole member, or as the only central member serving a much more peripherally involved member body.

Food Policy Entity Type, Focus, and Function

- ◇ There are a wide array of FPEs in Washington each with specific focuses, and with different funding, staffing, networking, structural, cultural, and geographic considerations and needs.
- ◇ Entities ranged from nonprofits to grassroots coalitions to government established directives, and from organizations that were several decades old, to groups in their first year of existence.
- ◇ More than one third of the sample was directly linked to local or regional government and received support from associated government offices. Others were either housed within or affiliated with nonprofits, founded via government initiatives, convened as part of a grant-funded project, or brought together as a grassroots coalition.
- ◇ Over half of the entities were focused at the County level followed by about 20% reporting being focused in each of the categories of 'both city/municipality and county', 'region (multiple counties)', or 'Native, tribal, or indigenous lands'.
- ◇ Most entities reported receiving funding of less than \$25,000 annually, with some operating with no funds whatsoever.
- ◇ Over half of the sample had some form of official written charter, mission and vision, action plan, or other directive documentation. There was major overlap between these groups, often ultimately striving towards more "equitable, sustainable, and resilient" food systems.
- ◇ The top tasks engaged in by FPEs included learning about food systems problems, needs, and partners and helping to coordinate efforts and build trust between members and external partners. Goals or efforts that all FPEs reported working toward over the past year included working as connectors of multiple food sectors and food systems and fostering holistic food systems thinking. Their target populations ranged from all people of a geographic region to more specific food system sector focuses such as farmers, food processors, or people experiencing food insecurity.
- ◇ Food policy entities seem to be concentrated in Western Washington, in particular up and down the I-5 corridor, and in the Northwestern portion of the state.
- ◇ FPEs utilize many types of sub-groups or committees to accomplish work on specific tasks of goals. These working groups often completed their work between whole group meetings and presented progress or solicited feedback at the larger group convenings.

Membership and Member Expectations

- ◇ Membership numbers ranged from instances where the participant was the only official member or affiliate, to other groups that had loosely affiliated membership rosters with numbers up over 200.
- ◇ Some entities focused their membership on food system sector representation, or culturally specific representation, with members each chosen to bring unique expertise, formal affiliations and background. Others were open to all and had a broad mix of businesses, other organizations, government officials, and private citizens as members.
- ◇ Many food policy entities relied heavily on a small number of highly dedicated and motivated members who spearheaded the majority of work.

Current and Desired Resources and Support

- ◇ Dedicated administrative staff are hugely beneficial to the productivity and overall function of food policy entities. Administrative bandwidth was an extreme choke-point limiting all manner of work and organizational progress for those that did not have such staffing.
- ◇ A lack of funding, person power, and organizational bandwidth were all widely named as factors that inhibit work.
- ◇ Community engagement and partnerships/collaborations were the types of support most widely received by participating groups, followed by leadership and facilitation. Technical assistance and data sharing were the types of support received by the fewest groups.
- ◇ The types of support said to be most needed were funding followed by partnerships/collaborations and data sharing.

Key Findings Regarding Coordination Needs and Opportunities

Current Collaborations and Partnerships

- ◇ All participants spoke passionately about a diverse array of collaborations and partnerships that their entities pursue and maintain. There was strong sentiment that collaboration, which ranged from hyper-local grassroots community-building to region-spanning partnership and project development, was key to making progress towards more sustainable, just, and resilient food systems.
- ◇ Many participants noted that relationship building and “connecting the sector players” was the bulk of what they did in their roles.
- ◇ Some, particularly the more isolated and rural groups, said that collaboration was important to pursue specifically in the interest of maximizing knowledge sharing and “not reinventing the wheel” every step of the way.

Rules and standards regarding current collaborations

- ◇ None of the participating entities reported having official rules or standards relating to collaboration.
- ◇ A few shared concerns about collaborating with certain types of organizations, namely government entities, major corporations, and organizations that are rooted primarily in the major, comparatively well-resourced, urban centers in the state.

Barriers to collaboration

- ◇ A lack of funding was commonly named as a barrier to collaboration. Participants mentioned that a lack of funding, combined with a related lack of consistency and organizational bandwidth, make it difficult to present as a worthwhile partner.
- ◇ Time and person power was another commonly named barrier. With many of the participating groups either run primarily by a single individual, volunteers, and/or people who have other full-time jobs, there was a chronic shortage of the administrative time and expertise needed to conceptualize, initiate, and facilitate collaborations.

Desired collaboration

- ◇ All were interested in greater coordination and sharing between FPEs across the state, with particular excitement shared at the prospect of learning from and modeling off other groups, and generally bolstering familiarity with the range of food systems efforts across the state.
- ◇ The potential types of coordination or collaboration that FPEs were most interested in engaging in included policy advocacy, funding and resource sharing, networking, and policy development and implementation. Interviews suggested why this might be the case in that FPEs discussed the potential of a network approach for systemic change and felt that the activities that could best be engaged in by a network would be those that no organization could accomplish alone.
- ◇ Most were open to collaborating via a variety of potential modes. Conventional digital communication methods such as Zoom and email were most preferred.
- ◇ Participants stressed the need to make communication accessible for as wide a variety of people as possible, naming hybrid meetings and multiple correspondence options as possible considerations.
- ◇ Some entities that were not currently engaged in direct food policy efforts suggested that a chance to better collaborate with other groups on united advocacy efforts would be helpful towards getting their own policy work off the ground.

Reflections on a greater level of connection/coordination between food policy groups in Washington

- ◇ Everyone who participated expressed general support for a statewide convening or greater coordination of FPEs, though there was a great variety of opinions among the sample regarding the specifics of what such a convening might look like and what might be most helpful.
- ◇ There were many suggestions for compensating participating people and entities, particularly those struggling with inadequate resources, and particularly for in-person meetings that are generally considered a big commitment.
- ◇ While generally enthusiastic about more interfacing among food policy entities statewide, some participants brought up considerations they felt were important to keep in mind as such modes of collaboration were designed. These included being mindful of accessibility and ensuring that historically excluded perspectives and representatives of marginalized communities felt empowered to come to the table.
- ◇ Participants emphasized the importance of not pursuing a “one size fits all” approach to collaborative models, and working to ensure that each individual food policy group is able to gain value out of effort that they put into statewide collaborations.
- ◇ Several participants suggested smaller convenings broken out by region, entity type, shared interests, or other groupings. These could be held either instead of or in addition to any statewide undertaking.

Recommendations to Support a Thriving Food Policy Entity Network

Based on findings from the FPE interviews and surveys, we recommend the following strategies aimed at bolstering FPEs individually and at creating coordination opportunities and supports. Together these strategies are designed to create a thriving food policy entity network in the state of Washington. More detail on these strategies can be found in the full report.

Strategies for Providing Support to Food Policy Entities

- ◇ Support food policy entities in finding stable funding for the organization and grant funding for special projects.
- ◇ Help food policy entities get administrative staffing support.
- ◇ Engage food policy entities in building their individual capacities to operate effectively through peer-to-peer learning.
- ◇ Sponsor or support hands-on training and workshops where food policy entities can learn common skills and tools.
- ◇ Provide an online space to showcase the value of food policy entities and for local councils to connect with one another.

Strategies for Coordinating Food Policy Entities in Washington State

- ◇ Make clear the value proposition.
- ◇ Sponsor networking events for food policy entities to connect with each other by grouping entities by key characteristics (e.g., geography, budget, experience).
- ◇ Develop an advisory group or steering committee to guide future planning.
- ◇ Explore the lack of food policy entities east of the Cascades and opportunities for growth.
- ◇ Work to counteract historical inequities and underrepresentation.
- ◇ Plan in processes and time for trust building.
- ◇ Prioritize accessibility.
- ◇ Invest in further monitoring, evaluation, and research.

Introduction

Food policy groups (FPGs), which typically include councils, networks, and coalitions, are collaborative bodies that bring together diverse stakeholders from various sectors to address local and regional food system challenges.¹ FPGs are typically defined as advisory or decision-making groups that work to improve outcomes such as food security, food system resiliency, and sustainable agriculture within their communities. They often engage with government agencies, community organizations, farmers, businesses, and consumers to develop and advocate for policies that promote food access, equity, and sustainability. Prior literature indicates that FPGs undertake activities such as conducting research, recommending policies, implementing programs, and fostering community engagement to achieve their goals.²

The importance and presence of food policy councils have been steadily growing in recent years, driven by increasing awareness of food system issues and the need for coordinated action. These councils offer a platform for communities to address food-related challenges in a holistic manner, considering social, economic, and environmental dimensions. By bringing together diverse groups of stakeholders and leveraging a wide range of skillsets, backgrounds, and expertise, FPGs can play a key role in creating more inclusive and equitable food systems. Their promise lies in their potential to influence policy decisions, leverage resources, and foster innovation in food production, distribution, and consumption practices.

There are growing efforts to support and connect local and regional food policy groups within states and regions. Some states have established networks to facilitate collaboration among FPGs, share best practices, and align policies at different levels of government. This coordination helps leverage collective expertise and resources, enabling FPGs to amplify their impact and advocate for broader systemic changes. States often provide funding, technical assistance, and policy guidance to local councils, recognizing their role in advancing state-level food policy goals and addressing regional disparities in food access and sustainability.

Several statewide networks already exist, and range in their relationship to government, with some being funded by state efforts and comprehensive food plans and others existing independently or housed within a university. The Maine Network of Community Food Councils was one of the earliest state collaboratives, emerging in 2011. This network brings together 11

¹ The definition of a food policy group (FPG) is distinct, though similar and with considerable overlap, to our research team's definition of a food policy entity (FPE) for the sake of this report. We use FPE as the preferred term through the bulk of this report when referring to this project, but as context, background on FPGs was important to include.

² Calancie L, Allen NE, Weiner BJ, Ng SW, Ward DS, Ammerman A. Food policy council self-assessment tool: Development, testing, and results. *Prev Chronic Dis.* 2017;14:160281. doi:10.5888/pcd14.160281.

food policy councils in a community of practice to learn about each other's work, share information about funding, help promote the work of the councils, and to provide a space to discuss challenges and needs.³ The Michigan Local Food Council Network has existed since 2015 and brings together 27 local Michigan-based food councils to provide resources, build skills, facilitate connections, and learn about statewide initiatives.⁴ Other existing state networks include, but are not limited to, the Wisconsin Local Food Network, the Indiana Food Council Network, the Ohio Food Policy Network, the Massachusetts Food System Collaborative, and the Connecticut Food System Alliance.⁵ Recently, in 2022, Maryland was awarded USDA funds to launch the Maryland Community Food Council Collaborative. These funds will be used to establish a statewide community of practice between Maryland's existing and emerging local food councils. The award will fund local conveners to collaborate and to help determine and pursue shared priorities and will enable more effective implementation of statewide initiatives across the network.⁶ Fewer state networks exist in the midwestern, southern, southwestern, and western regions of the United States.

Washington has particularly active and diverse food systems. Many state agencies have a long-standing vested interest in food systems, and food and food systems focused nonprofits, grassroots coalitions, councils, and other groups spread across the state are numerous. To better understand food policy groups in Washington State, and to consider the potential and possibilities of better FPG coordination and support, the Washington State Food Policy Forum, the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC), and the Washington State Department of Agriculture identified food policy councils as a 2024 area for exploration and contracted with the University of Washington Food Systems, Nutrition, and Health Research Team (UW FSNH) to conduct initial research towards a greater understanding of those active in Washington's food policy realm. The project had 3 key goals:

1. Identify the full extent of food policy groups operating across the state.
2. Gain an understanding of the diversity of functions, goals, interests, and other important considerations among these groups.
3. Gauge interest and need in terms of support, networking, and collaboration among Washington food policy groups.

³ <https://www.mainefoodcouncils.net/projects>

⁴ https://www.canr.msu.edu/local_food_council_network/

⁵ <https://clf.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=daaf010d6cc24089a0ca14e6cb235c40>

⁶ <https://mocofoodcouncil.org/rfspgrantrelease/>

Methods

Our approach consisted of a series of semi-structured key informant interviews with representatives of food policy entities and an online survey administered as a follow-up to the interviews. The interview was focused on better understanding the history, function, goals, and needs of participating food policy entities and to gauge their interest and need in terms of support, networking, and collaboration with other Washington food policy groups. The online follow-up survey was designed to collect administrative details and took a systematic approach to asking about activities and collaboration preferences, including some intentional redundancy with the interview to ensure that any key characteristics missed in interviews could still be captured. As this project was intended to be a preliminary investigation likely to be followed by more intensely coordinated work, the interview and survey instruments, as well as the recruitment materials and other participant communications, were designed primarily to establish a broad, foundational understanding of the landscape of food policy work in Washington.

Defining a Food Policy Entity

In setting out to learn more about the range of food policy entities active across Washington, we first needed to be able to clearly articulate a working definition of a food policy entity for recruitment purposes. While there are many clear and preexisting definitions of food policy councils, networks, and groups, we wanted to ensure that a wide sampling net was cast to include entities that might be pertinent to this work but not identify closely with the term “food policy” or who might not consider their group to be a “food policy council,” a common name for these types of groups.⁷ The concern of unintentional exclusion had to be balanced against the risk of inundating this initial, exploratory study with a large number of food-focused groups that did not have any food policy focus. In attempting to strike this balance, we defined a food policy entity as “any group or organization working across more than one component of the food system, that in some way, directly or indirectly, aims to change, create, or otherwise influence policy relating to the food system.”

⁷ <https://www.foodpolicynetworks.org/>
<https://foodsecurity.org/fpc/>
<https://ucanr.edu/sites/marinfoodpolicycouncil/files/178441.pdf>
<https://www.scc.wa.gov/food-policy>

Sample Development

We identified the food policy entity sample in two steps. First, we compiled an initial list of entities utilizing 1) a list shared with us by the Washington State Conservation Commission consisting of possible food policy entities, 2) our own knowledge and professional networks as Washington-based food systems researchers, and 3) a thorough web search. Wherever possible, we used the entity's web presence to verify that they likely met criteria to participate and to find up-to-date contact information. Next, we shared the compiled list of entities with each participant after their interview, asking them to add any missing entities.

The final list comprised 25 entities, who were contacted via email with recruitment text that included an explanation of the project, our working definition of a food policy entity, and a request to participate in both an interview and follow-up survey. Up to 3 follow-up emails were sent to those who did not respond initially. Participation incentives were not offered, but participants were assured access to the final project report.

Interview Development and Deployment

The semi-structured interview guide was developed iteratively by the study team. Initial questions were formed via a mix of online research into comparable food policy research tools that had been employed elsewhere, adherence to key areas of focus that the Washington State Conservation Commission had tasked us with exploring, and drawn from prior interview guides developed by our team. The final product (Appendix A) was a flexible and conversational interview guide designed to be facilitated in 1 hour or less, consisting of 12 broad questions with detailed follow-up questions to ensure all relevant detail was captured.

The interview guide was designed with the knowledge that it would be paired with a corresponding online survey. As such, we developed a list of information we hoped to glean from the project as a whole, and then parsed questions out between the interview guide and survey over several rounds of drafting. The interview guide focused on questions, topics, and complexities that could not as thoroughly be captured via a largely quantitative and online survey.

Potential participants were invited, via emailed recruitment language, to participate in an interview regarding the form, function, goals, and needs of their food policy entity and interests in collaboration with other Washington State food policy entities. Interviews took roughly 1 hour each to complete and were held over Zoom. An online scheduling poll was provided as part of the initial recruitment language allowing participants to select an interview slot from predetermined availability of the study team. As interviewees confirmed their participation, they were sent a calendar invite with a Zoom link included, as well as interview consent language and a complete copy of the interview guide to review in advance of the interview. Verbal consent was

acquired at the beginning of each interview, and the interview facilitator asked permission to make an audio recording of the interview, to be used expressly by the study team for the sake of accuracy and performing more detailed analyses than simple notes would allow.

At the end of each interview, participants were asked to look over our working list of food policy entities and add any suggestions. A total of 25 entities received a request to interview, of which 17 ultimately participated between April and May 2024. Of the 8 who did not participate, 2 declined participation, 2 were recently defunct or otherwise no longer functioning, 2 did not respond to our requests, and 2 agreed to participate but could not schedule before data collection closed. All 17 interviewees agreed to have their interviews recorded. All 17 interviews were led by the same study team member acting as lead facilitator for consistency, with a secondary interviewer and notetaker also present for most of the interviews.

Survey Development and Deployment

The online survey, developed in tandem with the interview guide for use as a follow-up instrument, was adapted in part from Ayrton Walker's 2019 masters thesis work examining Virginia food policy groups and the Food Policy Council Self-Assessment Tool developed by Larissa Calancie from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.^{8,9} The survey (Appendix B) collected entity characteristics (e.g., budget, membership numbers) and took a more systematic approach to asking about activities in which the entity engaged and collaboration preferences that the entity would prioritize.

The study team went through several iterations of drafting the survey. When finished, the survey was entered into REDCap, an online survey-building and database management software, and tested extensively by team members. The final, online version of the survey took between 10 and 20 minutes to complete. After all but 2 of the interviews, participants were sent a follow up email thanking them for their time and expertise and requesting that they take time to fill out the online survey. One of the 17 interviewees were deemed a poor fit to take the follow-up survey, as they did not meet our definition of a food policy entity. Up to 3 follow-up emails were sent to those who did not complete the survey. Of the 15 who were asked to complete the follow-up survey, 14 submitted responses.

⁸ Walker A, Kraak V, Harden S, Clark S. An Exploration of the Structure, Issue Framing and Priorities of Virginia's Food Policy Groups to Collaborate on a Healthy, Resilient and Sustainable Food System. Submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Human Nutrition, Foods, and Exercise. 2019.

⁹ Calancie L, Allen NE, Weiner BJ, Ng SW, Ward DS, Ammerman A. Food policy council self-assessment tool: Development, testing, and results. *Prev Chronic Dis.* 2017;14:160281. doi:10.5888/pcd14.160281.

Food Policy Entity Activity in Washington

Seventeen of the 25 contacted entities participated in interviews and 14 of the 17 completed the online follow-up survey. All 17 participating entities were currently active, though 1 group reported being in the midst of a major restructuring. Several made a point of clarifying that they did not consider their groups to be food policy entities, but 15 of the 17 organizations interviewed ultimately fit our definition of a food policy entity. In the findings below, we are including interview data from the 15 entities that fit our definition of a food policy entity and survey data from 14 of these 15 entities who completed the survey.

Most entities reported their organization type as embedded in government (n=5) or non-profit (n=7) (see Table 1). Entity membership ranged from single digits up to more than 200 unique participating individuals and organizations. Many reported that membership fluctuated widely over time. The most common entity formats consisted of a smaller core council, steering committee, or administrative person that led, had oversight, or otherwise facilitated the bulk of the work. Participating entities were funded from a variety of sources, though the majority of the sample functioned on a budget of less than \$25,000 per year (see Table 1), with several reporting zero budget and an entirely volunteer format.

Relationships with government varied widely among the groups. One of the 15 reported no interface whatsoever with government. Some reported that government officials or public agency staff sat on their boards and committees, or that government officials or offices provided political support to the organization. Others were closely affiliated, supported by, or even officially a part of city, county, or state government. Support received from government agencies ranged from staff time, to public verbal and written affirmations, to direct funding. Several groups were founded by or in partnership with a governmental agency, though some had since shifted and were currently independent with less direct government affiliations. Affiliations with local or regional health districts, conservation districts, and WSU county extension offices were common. Many groups had a facilitator or administrator whose time was supported by their role in a government agency.

Data collection timeframe: Apr – May 2024		
n	14 ^a	
Survey participant roles within FPEs		
Coordinator, administrator, or facilitator	5	(35%)
Director or other leadership role	5	(35%)
Group member	3	(21%)
Staff member	1	(7%)
Geographic focuses of FPEs		
Neighborhood	1	(7%)
County	8	(57%)
Both city/municipality and county	3	(21%)
Region (multiple counties and/or multiple states)	3	(21%)
Native, tribal, or indigenous lands	3	(21%)
FPE organization types		
Non-profit	3	(21%)
Housed in another non-profit	4	(29%)
Grassroots coalition	1	(7%)
Embedded in government	5	(35%)
Ad Hoc community advisory group	1	(7%)
Annual budgets of FPEs		
<\$25,000	8	(57%)
\$25,000 to \$49,999	2	(14%)
\$50,000 to \$99,999	2	(14%)
\$100,000 to \$499,999	1	(7%)
>\$500,000	1	(7%)
FPEs links to government		
Government-driven food policy initiative	2	(14%)
Hybrid model with direct links to government	4	(29%)
Linked to government through a secondary agency	2	(14%)
Civil society organization with limited government involvement	5	(35%)
Civil society organization with no government involvement	1	(7%)
Familiarity with the Washington State Food Policy Forum (FPF)		
Worked with or interfaced with the FPF before	6	(43%)
Know of the FPF but have not interacted with them before	4	(29%)
Not familiar with the FPF	4	(29%)
(a) 2 of the 17 interviewees were deemed a poor fit for the online follow up survey as they did not fit our definition of a food policy entity. 1 of the remaining 15 who were sent the online follow up survey did not complete it.		

Table 1. Food policy entity characteristics, derived from online survey responses (n=14)

Participant Background and roles

Most participants had been either with their specific organization or working in the food systems sphere in Washington for a significant amount of time (10+ years). Of those that were newer to food systems, most were coming from a public health and governmental policy background, with a small minority coming from non-food-related grassroots organizing or economic or land development backgrounds. Interviewees held a variety of different positions within their respective organizations. Some were directors that were in an essential leadership role, while others were administrators or facilitators hired by the group or serving the group as part of a paid position with a government entity, grant-funded project, or non-profit (Table 1).

A significant portion of those interviewed seemed to be in a position as the singular member allowing their respective group to function. Sometimes this went along with being the only paid member, but in other instances it was a single volunteer doing the bulk of work. It was common that, at least among our sample, food policy efforts were being sustained and moved along primarily by a single highly motivated person. Some of these participants voiced serious concerns about the sustainability of their work, citing burnout, an inability to find successors, and challenges with transferring the necessary skills and knowledge to others. A few interviewees raised other concerns about the largely volunteer nature of their work; if a large portion of food policy work is being carried out or led by those who can, for example, afford to not be compensated for their time, there was worry that the trajectory of such work will be shaped by fewer perspectives than should ideally be at the table.

Food policy entity type, focus, and function

The 15 participating food policy entities varied widely in type, function, and historical background. They ranged from nonprofits to grassroots coalitions to government established directives, and from organizations that were several decades old, to groups in their first year of existence. More than one third of the sample was directly linked to local or regional government, and received at least some support, financial or otherwise, from associated government offices. A few participating groups were the direct product of government initiatives. Others were either housed within or affiliated with nonprofits (Table 1). At least 1 group was convened as part of a grant, and the future of the group after the grant ended was unclear. Over half of the entities were focused at the county level followed by about 20% reporting being focused in each of the categories of 'both city/municipality and county', 'region (multiple counties or states),' or 'Native, tribal, or indigenous lands.' Participants reported receiving funding from various levels of government, grants, and private donations. Most functioned on less than \$25,000 annually. With

at least 1 group, it seemed likely that they were operating with no funding whatsoever, potentially paying administrative costs out of their own personal pockets.

Over half of the sample had some form of official written charter, mission and vision, action plan, or other directive documentation. While there was variety in mission and focus between groups, most who could articulate clear guiding principles had major overlap, often ultimately striving towards more “equitable, sustainable, and resilient” food systems. When asked about the populations that their organizations serve, some participants said everyone within their target geographic area. Others were more specifically committed to serving certain food system sectors, particularly agriculture, food processing, local food retail businesses, food banks and other hunger relief organizations, and health clinics or departments concerned with burdens of nutrition-related disease.

Relatively few of those interviewed reported having official policy arms doing direct work lobbying or towards policy creation, though many expressed the desire to have more concerted policy efforts in the future. Some also reported distinct policy sub-groups or direct policy work in the group’s past that were not currently active due to a lack of resources, particular powerhouse members leaving, or changing internal priorities. However, all participants detailed indirect, or less official interfacing with food policy efforts. These ranged from having government officials affiliated with the group, to working towards reports or region-specific food systems assessments or other data collection for use as advocacy tools, to grassroots activism and community solidarity efforts towards greater organizing capacity.

Day to day function of the food policy entities varied. Some had at least one or even several paid staff members doing related work daily. On the other end of the spectrum, others were loosely affiliated committees meeting monthly or even annually, often with work being done by a smaller core group or single individual between meetings of the larger group.

In the online follow-up survey, participants were asked to name general tasks engaged in by their entity, as well as to identify efforts in which they have been active in the past year. Learning about food systems problems, along with learning about, coordinating efforts, and facilitating trust building with external partners, were among the top tasks engaged in more generally (Figure 1). In the year prior to taking the survey, working to connect multiple food related systems and fostering holistic food systems thinking were unanimously reported endeavors (Figure 2). In addition to these task and effort categories, participants reported several other endeavors, including the implementation of food systems plans, development of comprehensive food system assessments, advocating for funding, and educating the public about the importance of buying local foods.



Figure 1. Tasks engaged in by surveyed entities (n=14)

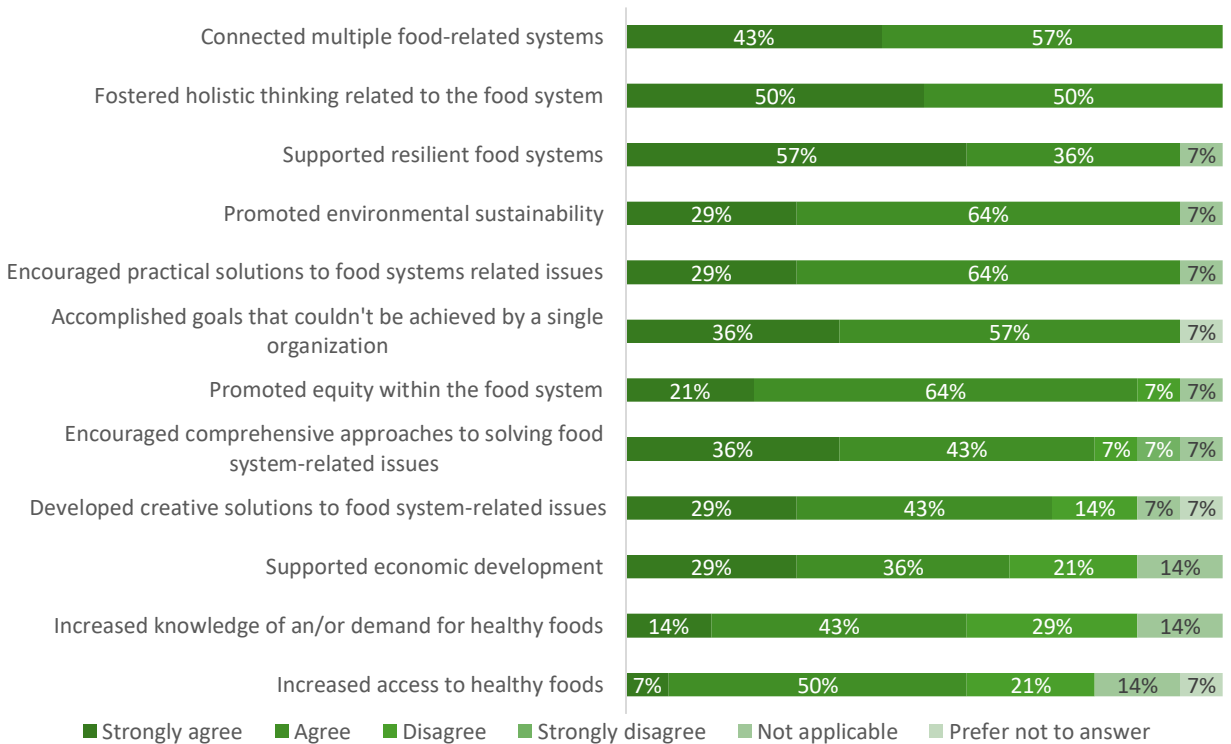


Figure 2. Level of agreement that participants' entities actively engaged in efforts in the 12 months prior to taking the survey (n=14)

Eleven respondents reported that their entities utilized sub-groups or committees that were focused on more specific topics or goals. These working groups were often described as more active and streamlined than the larger member body, meeting more often and coordinating efforts more heavily. Working groups were commonly said to do stints of work related to their areas of focus between whole group meetings, and then present progress and solicit feedback at the larger convenings. Table 2 shows the range of specific working groups described by participants.

Data collection timeframe: Apr – May 2024	
n = 11 ^a	
<p>Agriculture and food processing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Healthy agriculture Regional food and agriculture Meat processing Agritourism Farm, fish, and flood issues 	<p>Communications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhancement and engagement Communications Communications Outreach Resource and referral
<p>Equity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equity Equity and justice 	<p>Land and resource access</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Healthy lands and waterways Farmland preservation and land access Farmland preservation
<p>Food access, security, and sovereignty</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Food access Tribal food sovereignty Healthy food for all Farm to school 	<p>Internal function</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Convening Steering Hiring and consultant selection Values and principles
<p>Policy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy and government Legislative and policy Policy 	<p>Unique</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic development Climate change and adaptation Comprehensive plan Regional food systems grant program Food systems mapping
<p>(a) 11 of the 14 online survey respondents stated that their FPE functioned with working groups that were more targeted than the FPE as a whole. This table provides general categories and a breakdown of the specific working groups shared by those 11 respondents.</p>	

Table 2. Working groups and committees reported by surveyed entities

Membership and Member Expectations

Membership numbers varied greatly between participating entities. In a couple of cases the participant was the only official member or affiliate. Other groups had larger memberships that ranged in exclusivity, formal membership processes, and numbers. Some screened or selectively recruited members and consciously limited their membership numbers in the name of streamlining work and not becoming mired in communication breakdowns. On the other end of the spectrum, some groups had loosely affiliated membership rosters with numbers up over 200. Some entities focused their membership on food system sector representation, or culturally specific representation, with members each chosen to bring unique expertise, formal affiliations and background. Others were open to all and had a broad mix of businesses, other organizations, government officials, and private citizens as members (Figure 3). Participation in some of the more formalized, and often better-resourced groups, came with specific expectations and roles, and in some cases compensation for participation. Other entities reported no formal requirements to be a member, and that interested parties could show up, volunteer for tasks, and come and go as they pleased.

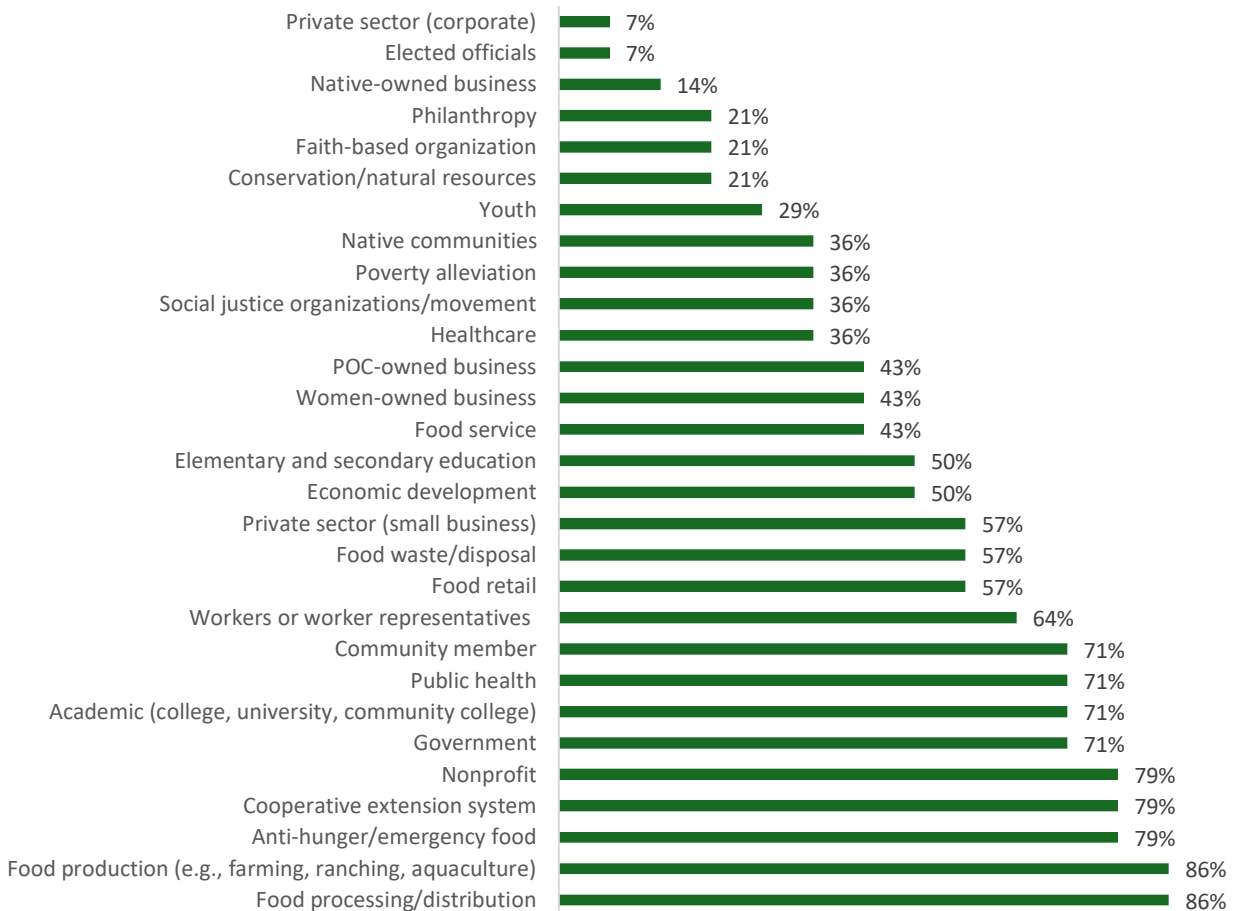


Figure 3. Food system sectors represented among the memberships of surveyed entities (n=14)

Many participants reported significant efforts in recent years to widen their engagement, membership, and audiences. There was often particular emphasis on trust-building with marginalized and under resourced communities that have been often excluded from or harmed by similar efforts in the past. In particular, over half of the sample talked about working towards fostering or growing connections with tribal governments, food sovereignty initiatives, and native communities broadly. Others shared the sentiment that, while they're sure they are missing important perspectives and input in their work, it's hard to know who the missing parties are because, in essence, 'you can't know what you don't know.' It was said to be particularly difficult to identify and engage with missing perspectives, given how under-resourced and inundated with work some of these groups were.

Current and desired resources and support

Via the interview process and follow-up online survey, participants were asked both about types of support their groups received (Figure 4) and types of support that were needed or would be helpful (Figure 5). Regarding the types of support the groups received in the past year, community engagement and partnerships/collaborations were the types of support received by most groups, followed by leadership and facilitation. Technical assistance and data sharing were the types of support received by the fewest groups. In contrast, the types of support most needed were funding followed by partnerships/collaborations and data sharing; no entities selected community engagement as a need.

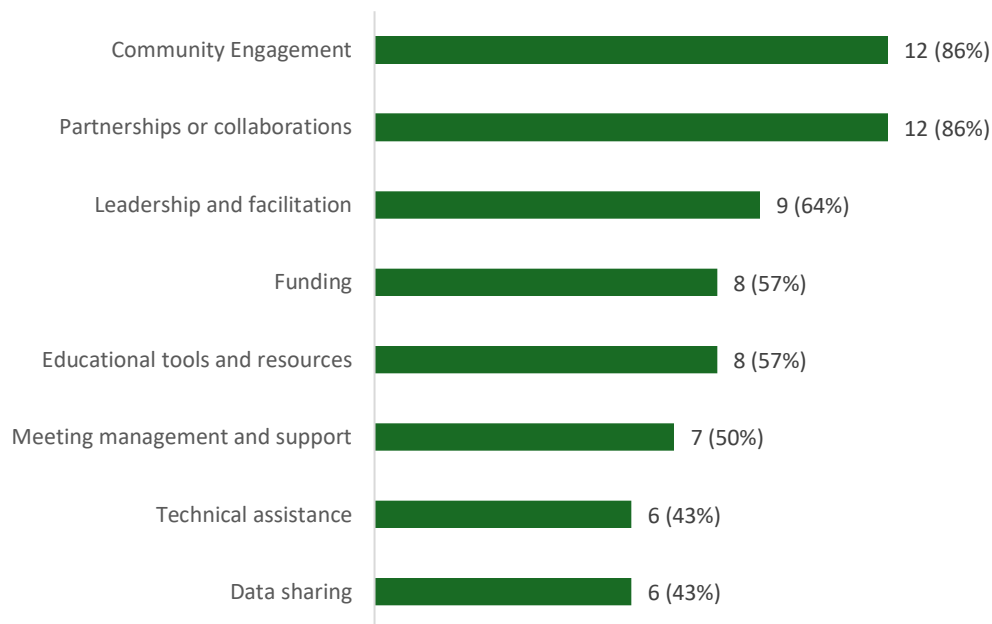


Figure 4. Types of support received by surveyed entities in the 12 months prior to taking the survey (n=14)

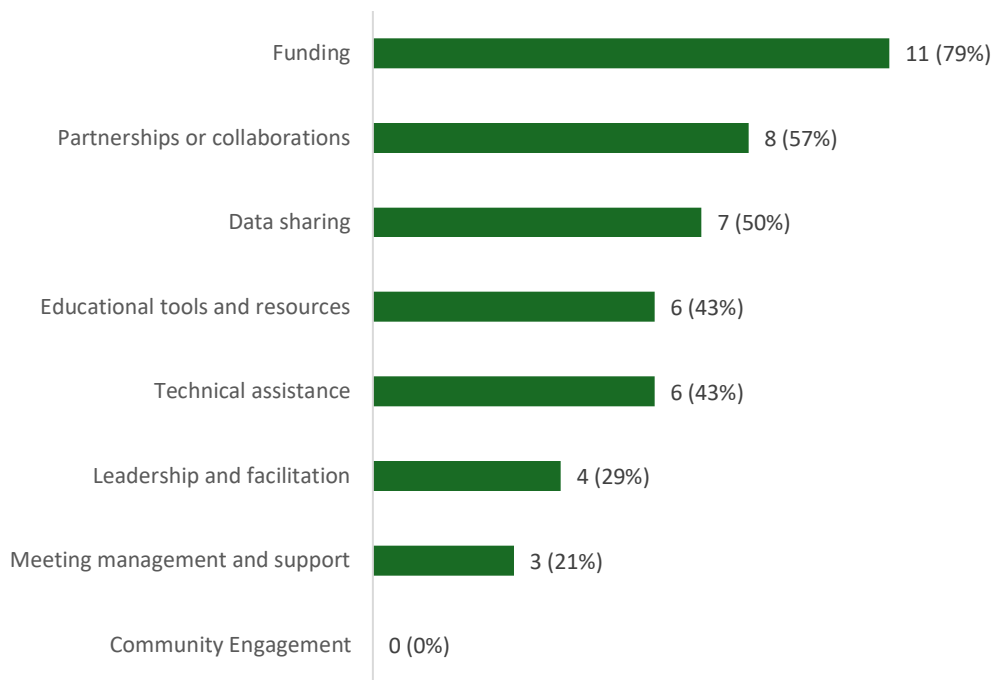


Figure 5. Types of support that would be helpful to receive according to surveyed entities (n=14)

The interviews further contextualized these findings. Funding was key, and while not the only need named by participants, the common thread of inadequate funding tied to many other needs shared by participants. One participant mentioned a need, not just for funding, but for a high level of collaboration between food policy and food systems organizations across the state to advocate for greater funding as a united front. While this was not stated quite so clearly by others, the sentiment that much more could be achieved with a greater level of coordination between groups was almost unanimous. One participant shared a belief that funding only goes so far when the relationship and trust building groundwork has not been done, and that they felt as though data and monitoring, which are important, get a disproportionate amount of funding in relation to the groups with boots on the ground that lack the resourcing to truly respond to such findings. Others named information sharing, educational resources, and technical assistance as needed resources.

Some categories of needed support were not particularly widely expressed among the sample but were intensely wanted by a minority of participants that did not have adequate support in those areas. A prime example is that of administrative and facilitation support. Increasing person power was a need that several said would be exceedingly helpful. In some cases, interviewees shared that bolstered administrative and organizing help would be more or less essential to their ability to meaningfully engage in a more involved, statewide convening of food policy entities.

Future goals

When asked about goals for the future, participants responded in different ways. Some outlined specific projects that were currently in progress. This was particularly the case among groups who had been founded around a specific initial goal such as creating a food system assessment, or among groups that were engaged heavily in internal restructuring and introspection. Among these groups there was a sentiment that it was exceedingly difficult to speak about the future until the current, essential work was completed and its outcomes clear. Other participants shared future goals that ranged from detailed plans to, for example, scale up the organization or widen their spheres of engagement, to much more general and sometimes lofty dreams for what the group would like to look like given infinite resourcing. These wish lists included more robust avenues for community input and participation, and more funding and staffing, particularly staffing that can be involved on a longer-term basis so as not to lose momentum. Several shared that they plan to expand their efforts into more explicitly policy-focused work in the future.

Coordination needs and opportunities

Current Collaborations and partnerships

Nearly all participants reported their entities spending significant time and effort researching, building, and maintaining partnerships and collaborations (Figure 1). Defining collaborations was sometimes tricky, and participants had a broad range of initial responses. The line distinguishing external from internal was sometimes blurred, as much of the outreach, relationship building, and communication development efforts were the same between external partners and actual group members. When we asked about collaboration some would start talking about how they approach outside entities as a united front, whereas others might talk about, for example, how they've been engaging with a particular entity for some time and building trust with the hope that a representative might accept a seat on their council. This was further confounded by the wide range of group structures, as often group membership was primarily a host of representatives from various entities convened by a single person, small group, or government initiative. Collaborations that participants named ranged from funded joint initiatives with other organizations, to providing support to more directly people-serving organizations, to simply developing mutual understandings and cordial relationships.

Regardless, there was essentially unanimous sentiment that collaboration and partnership at all levels were absolutely crucial to doing good work in the food systems and policy world. Many participants noted that relationship building and “connecting the sector players” was truly the bulk of what they did in their roles. Some, particularly the more isolated and rural groups, said that collaboration was important to pursue specifically in the interest of maximizing knowledge sharing and “not reinventing the wheel” every step of the way.

Rules and standards regarding collaboration

None of the participating entities reported having official rules or standards relating to collaboration. Some were eager to approach collaboration with essentially any pertinent entities. Others expressed more reservation, some wanting to grow sustainably and work within their capacity, and some hoping to avoid partnerships with specific groups that could not ultimately be adequately supported.

A few participants shared concern about collaborating with certain types of organizations, namely government entities, major corporations, and organizations that are rooted primarily in the major, relatively wealthy, urban centers in the state. Caution regarding collaborating with government seemed to stem from worries about government's ability to stick to timelines, or, somewhat antithetically, to not impose restrictive timelines and other limiting stipulations.

Regarding corporations, concerns named were mainly around environmental sustainability and equity, as well as stonewalling and a lack of transparency that some had experienced working with corporations in the past. When it came to organizations based in powerful urban centers, there were concerns that representatives of such groups would be tone deaf or otherwise problematic, that they would not intimately understand the specific geographic or sociocultural issues at play in other regions, and that better resourced organizations could overshadow or steamroll smaller efforts.

Barriers to collaboration

Reported barriers that prevent or otherwise make collaboration difficult were numerous. A lack of funding was commonly listed across several different contexts. For example, participants named a lack of funding as a barrier to bringing new members to the table or forging partnerships with marginalized and under resourced communities largely because of an inability to adequately compensate people for their time and effort. Others mentioned that a lack of funding, combined with a related lack of consistency and organizational bandwidth, can make it difficult to present as a worthwhile partner.

Time was another commonly listed barrier. Most participants spoke about a general, extraordinary level of busyness that felt ubiquitous throughout their communities and professional circles alike. There was a clear sentiment that, regardless of the purpose or how valuable a connection might be, it is incredibly hard to consistently get people to dedicate time to do work, attend meetings, or even communicate via email. Similarly, person power was repeatedly brought up as a key barrier to collaboration. With many of the participating groups either run primarily by a single individual, and/or by volunteers, and/or by people who have other full-time jobs, there is a chronic shortage of the administrative time and expertise needed to conceptualize, initiate, and facilitate collaborations.

Another barrier listed was meeting, correspondence, and project overload. We heard from many participants that there were simply too many meetings, too many emails, and too many initiatives and projects to keep track of or meaningfully engage in. Some attributed this in part to a related barrier, which was that of geographic and professional siloing. With such a broad and diverse food policy and food systems sphere across Washington, it is common that entities do not know about some of the other groups doing similar work, much less the specific work that they are engaged in. This general lack of knowledge and communication can help to stoke confusion and redundancy across work being carried out by different groups. Lastly, a couple of participants mentioned more specific barriers to collaboration, notably a lack of internet reliability in rural areas, and travel distances too costly or time consuming to be regularly feasible.

Desired collaboration

Essentially all participants talked with excitement about potential future collaborations, however, specific hopes, and even articulation of any clear hopes regarding future collaboration, varied. Some were specific in their intentions and timelines, wanting to better engage or initiate partnerships with particular communities, sectors, or organizations in the near to mid-term, towards particular and clearly articulated goals. These goals ranged from building trust and garnering more representation from tribal communities, to partnering with more food and farm businesses in the name of regional food business development, to forging direct avenues of collaboration with government entities. Others were eager to interface with any food systems-related entities at all, with some citing feelings of being in the dark and wanting to feel more informed as to the breadth and depth of food systems work going on in the region generally. Others were enthusiastic about the idea of future collaborations broadly, but did not have clear ideas about what new collaborations might be impactful. Among these participants there was a recurring sentiment that while they were always open to exploring new collaborations, they were not actively being pursued. In some cases, these participants shared that they did not know what entities might be helpful connections to establish beyond their already established partnerships.

Reflections on a greater level of connection between food policy groups in Washington

Broadly, all participants were enthusiastic at the thought of a greater level of connection between food policy groups in Washington. There was general agreement that increased transparency, opportunities for collaboration and interfacing between food policy entities, and general understandings of the groups and food policy landscape would all be decidedly positive. Most were open to participating in a variety of potential options, examples being a listserv, periodic statewide meetings, or an interactive web space for resource and update sharing. Those who responded to the follow-up survey were given the prompt “Food policy and food systems groups could collaborate with other groups or with state agencies to enhance their impact and effectiveness in addressing food systems issues” and asked to rank types of potential collaborations between groups from most to least effective (Figure 6). The types of potential collaborations ranked highest were ‘policy advocacy’ and funding and resource sharing’ followed by ‘networking’ and ‘policy development and implementation’; the lowest ranked types of potential collaborations were ‘capacity building’ and ‘evaluation and monitoring’. While these combined rankings tell an important part of the story, it is important to note that preferences of each individual participant varied. It was not uncommon to see two participants with almost exact opposite rankings. This highlights the diversity of need and contexts that food policy entities contend with.

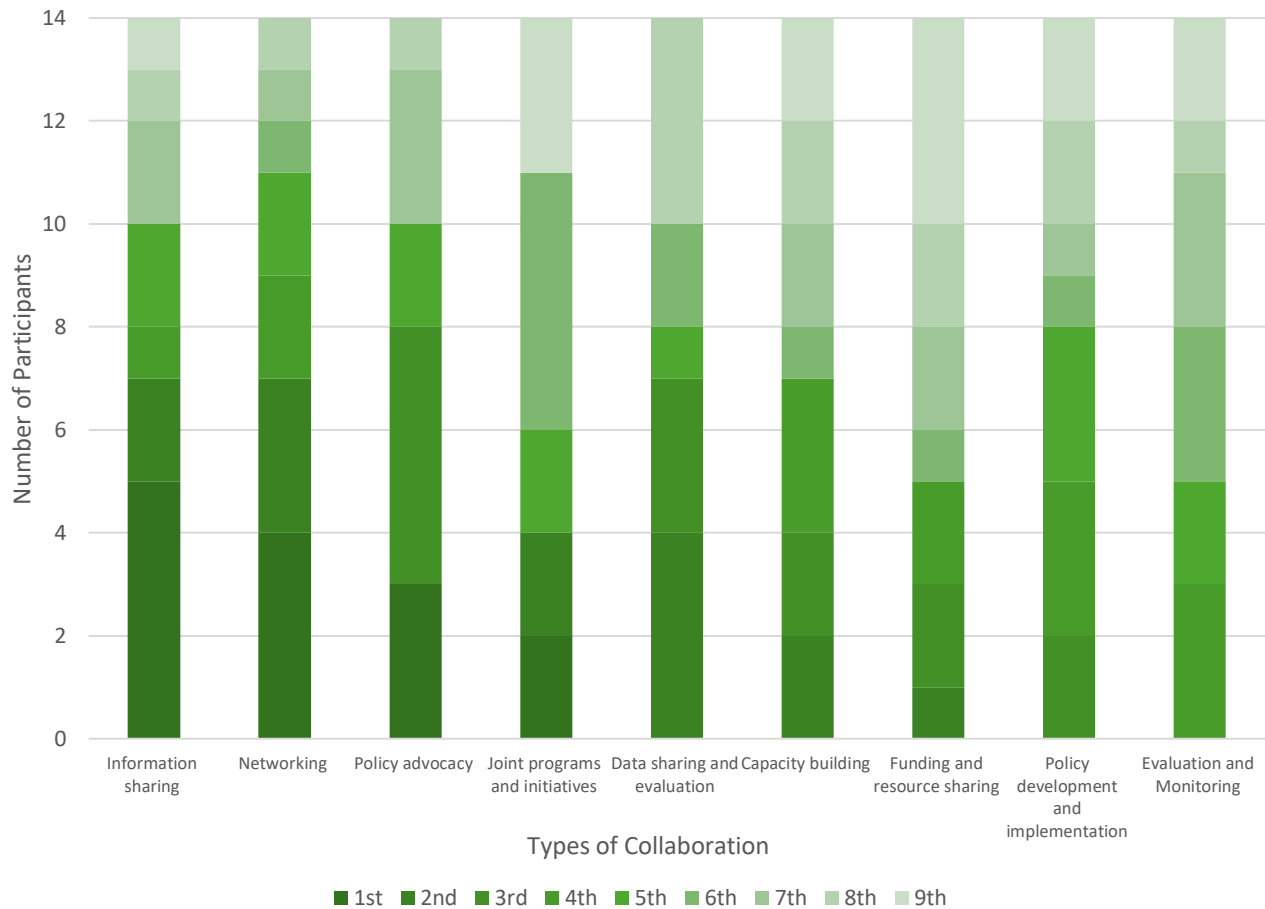


Figure 6. Types of potential collaboration among food policy and food systems entities in Washington, ranked based on perceived effectiveness from high to low by surveyed entities; combined rankings of all survey respondents (n=14)

When speaking to the notion of a greater level of connection between food policy groups in Washington, participants shared excitement about many potential benefits and opportunities. Many talked about how positive it would be to have a way to learn from and model off of other groups. This was a particularly emphasized point for those groups who are newer or who were considering restructuring. Similarly, the opportunity to model specific endeavors off of parallel efforts in other locales was brought up repeatedly as something that could save huge amounts of energy and time. A streamlined ability to interface with other groups and advocate for food systems change, funding, and other support as a united front was another common point of excitement. Some entities that were not currently engaged in direct food policy efforts suggested that a chance to better collaborate with other groups on united advocacy efforts would be helpful towards getting concerted policy work off the ground for their specific entity. Finally, there was a general attitude among participants that it would simply be nice to know more about all the different groups and people active across the state and what they are working on.

As part of the follow-up survey, participants were asked about their preferred modes of communication regarding collaboration among food policy entities. Conventional digital communication methods such as Zoom and email were most preferred according to survey responses (Figure 7) with phone calls and social media platforms being the least preferred. Via the interviews, participants stressed the need to make communication accessible for as wide a variety of people as possible, naming hybrid meetings and multiple correspondence options as considerations. There was also great emphasis put on compensating participating people and entities, particularly those struggling with inadequate resources, and particularly for in-person meetings that are generally considered a big commitment.

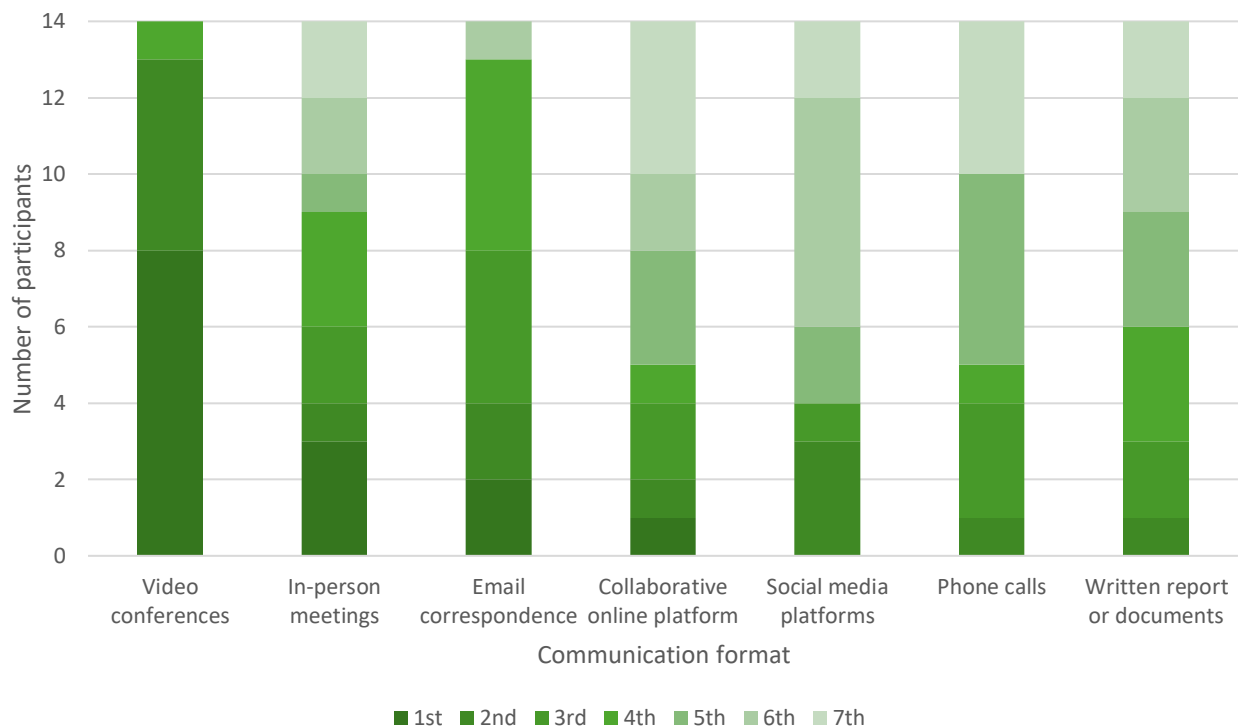


Figure 7. Potential modes of communication among food policy and food systems entities in Washington, ranked by surveyed entities by preference; combined rankings of all survey respondents (n=14)

Participants also discussed a variety of concerns about a potential convening of food policy entities from across the State. Some expressed worry about state entities like the Conservation Commission or the state-supported Washington Food Policy Forum having directorial power over such a convening. Similar to concerns raised by some of the more rural, under-resourced groups about interfacing with more heavily supported, urban groups, there was some feeling that staffers at state agencies are not always adequately tuned into the specific realities that individual entities are contending with. There was some sentiment that, albeit through no malice

or fault of their own, state entities might be out of touch in some circumstances, and moreover, potentially not able to flex quickly enough to address these concerns due to the rigidity of state bureaucracy. This said, even those with the most pointed concerns on this topic conveyed cautious optimism and an openness to any number of options.

Other concerns were centered around time, funding, and person power. A few participants shared that having yet another expensive, and time-consuming meeting could be a hard pitch to many overworked, under-resourced people who are boots on the ground. If a one-off or periodic statewide meeting were to be pursued, some noted that it would need to be exceedingly well-planned and very thoughtful to be worth attending. Similarly, most expressed that yet another listserv, quarterly call, or annual report to read would have to have a high level of intentionality behind it to actually be impactful rather than just yet another thing to keep track of and split energy between.

Several participants expressed concern at the prospect of a state-wide convening of food policy entities because of the fact that food systems vary so dramatically by geography, cultural specificity, urban and rural classifications, etc. that bringing all groups together might not be worth the effort required from all involved. Instead, several participants suggested smaller convenings broken out by region, entity type, shared interests, or other groupings. These could be held either instead of or in addition to any state-wide undertaking.

A few participants stated worry that a state-wide convening or method of interfacing could serve to perpetuate or even exacerbate disparities and inequity already present in Washington's food systems and food policy landscape, if at all carelessly facilitated. These participants talked about how the best-funded groups and people, who are often groups rooted in urban centers and serving comparatively affluent and privileged areas, could end up having the most bandwidth for engagement and therefore have disproportionate input and steering capacity. This highlights a common thread across all of the interviews, which is a belief that it will be important to ensure that communication and collaboration modes are chosen to allow for full and wide participation. Equally as important will be extensive consideration of the range of complex contexts that individual groups function within, ensuring that all involved truly will be receiving something valuable in return for their involvement.

Though a variety of concerns were raised, none of the 15 participants came close to ruling out participation in a statewide coordination of food policy entities. Nearly every worry expressed was put forward as a suggestion to be mindful of rather than a certain problem.

Discussion

We interviewed and surveyed Washington State food policy entities to learn more about their current activities, resources, and goals and to gain perspectives on their needs and opportunities regarding coordination. Our findings revealed a diverse array of entity types and resources, but also a high level of alignment regarding common challenges and aspirations. The concentration of entities in western Washington suggests potential opportunities for regional collaboration and shared learning, but also highlights the need for efforts to engage and support entities in other parts of the state.

Person hours, organizational bandwidth, and funding were consistent choke points reported to be limiting the speed and extent of work being done by participating entities. Administrative support was identified as pivotal to organizational functioning, with many entities benefiting from dedicated staff who played crucial roles in managing operations and facilitating collaborative endeavors. However, the reliance on a small core of dedicated individuals within these entities posed challenges, as turnover and transitions disrupt continuity and impact progress significantly.

Almost all participants mentioned equity as a current focus of their group, but equity-oriented efforts varied from group to group. Some were going to great lengths to scrutinize their own form and function, in a few cases engaging in restructuring efforts. Others were actively engaged in forging new community partnerships and collaborations in the interest of bringing historically marginalized perspectives and expertise to the table, and better serving and learning from under-resourced groups. Among many groups there was a great emphasis on meeting the geographic and sociocultural needs of their target populations.

Collaboration emerged as a cornerstone of the efforts of most groups, spanning from local community initiatives to broader regional partnerships. They were widely viewed as essential for advancing sustainable, just, and resilient food systems. Despite shared enthusiasm for collaboration, participants faced significant resource constraints, including limited funding, staffing shortages, and administrative bandwidth issues, which hindered organizational effectiveness and growth.

There is likely a need to further define “food policy entity” for the purpose of facilitating statewide interfacing between groups. Defining who all fits within this context and determining the right balance of inclusion without overwhelming any effort to convene or coordinate is important. There is potential for hurt feelings and political upset in limiting participation in any way, but also the risk of accidentally excluding important perspectives and resources. This balance will need to be thought about carefully in order to create coordination and convening

efforts that allow for a full diversity of input and participation while also retaining the ability to be truly impactful. Navigating such intricacy may be daunting, but with such resounding interest in a greater level of connection between food policy groups in Washington, and with so many of our participants sharing excitement for possible outcomes of such coordination, state agencies will not be alone in crafting a model that can ultimately be profoundly positive.

Study Strengths and Limitations

This study has many strengths, including our mixed methods approach and working directly with food policy entity participants to capture their thoughts, voices, and ideas. This study also has limitations, including the moderately small sample (n=17, of which only 15 met the criteria for our definition of food policy entity) and of those entities who declined, were unable to schedule, or did not respond the majority served primarily under-resourced populations. Thus, the participants who responded to this survey may not be representative of all food policy entities or perspectives in Washington State. The lack of clarity around the term food policy entity may have also presented a challenge to which groups were included in recruitment and which groups chose to respond to the recruitment inquiry. Despite these limitations, it is clear that the project captured a diverse set of food policy entities in Washington.

Recommendations

Based on findings from the FPE interviews and surveys, we recommend the following strategies aimed at bolstering FPEs individually and at creating coordination opportunities and supports. Together these strategies are designed to create a thriving food policy entity network in the state of Washington.

Strategies for Providing Support to Food Policy Entities

- ◇ **Support food policy entities in finding consistent funding for the organization and grant funding for special projects.** All participating entities named challenges and barriers that funding could directly help remedy. State, regional, and local agencies could allocate funds, help food policy entities find grant funds, or encourage counties or regions to invest in or take governing action to create more permanently funded food policy entities.
- ◇ **Help food policy entities gain stable administrative staffing support.** Encouraging or subsidizing local, county, and regional government offices and established nonprofits to consider allocating or donating staff time to help with the administrative burdens of running a food policy group could be very impactful among entities who do not have dedicated administrative or facilitating staff. As is clear from the interviews of entities both with and without such support staff, having an administrator or facilitator who is either paid for their time by the group, or who is funded via another position and able to dedicate part of their paid time to the group, makes a meaningful difference regarding capacity, organization, and consistency.
- ◇ **Engage food policy entities in building their individual capacities to operate effectively through peer-to-peer learning.** Beyond funding and staffing, the ability of food policy entities to achieve their goals can depend on their ability to develop and strengthen the processes and resources needed to grow, adapt, and thrive. Sharing processes and practices across the wide range of food systems and food policy entities could be valuable for accelerating uptake of best or useful practices and creating momentum and stability. This includes drawing on models of work, organization, publication, and collaboration that have already been successfully executed by others.
- ◇ **Sponsor or support hands-on training and workshops where food policy entities can learn common skills and tools.** Many food policy entities expressed interest in learning about commonly needed skills, such as food policy advocacy, or commonly used tools, such as community food assessments. Using these skills and tools effectively is often important for building credibility and momentum and setting the stage for success.

- ◇ **Provide an online space to showcase the value of food policy entities and for local councils to connect with one another.** Food policy entities are interested in learning about each other and each other's challenges and successes. Showcasing the value of food policy entities and what they have achieved as a result of their efforts could be valuable for legitimizing the role of these groups in fostering equitable and sustainable in the food system. A public-facing webpage, potentially as part of the Washington State Food Policy Forum website, that houses information about all Washington State food policy entities that is periodically updated could be one way of doing this. Related, including time for food policy entity updates into Washington State Food Policy Forum meetings could be another way of doing this.

Strategies for Coordinating Food Policy Entities in Washington State

- ◇ **Make clear the value proposition.** As the Washington Food Policy Forum continues to consider strategies for connecting, coordinating, and collaborating amongst and between statewide food policy entities, a high level of intentionality should be utilized considering the great diversity among entities in terms of structure, function, activities, and needs. There are widely differing opinions on what such coordination, collaboration, or convening should most look like. Most agreed that there was no "one size fits all" approach and that geography, sociocultural and political contexts, and organizational histories and capacities should all be considered to inform what will work best. Many felt that the value of a statewide network was that it could enable action toward systemic change that no one entity could accomplish alone. Making the value proposition clear is an integral initial step.
- ◇ **Sponsor networking events for food policy entities to connect with each other by grouping entities by key characteristics (e.g., geography, budget, experience).** The difference in resources and bandwidth between various food policy entities, while potentially a source of friction, may also be an opportunity to consider. Particularly if an element of whatever convening model that is ultimately adopted involves sub-convenings along lines of factors such as geographic, financial, or mission similarity. If done well, this could address concerns that statewide work might not be fully relevant to specific entities, and relatedly, that some entities might struggle to have their specific considerations represented. One idea was that more well-established or well-resourced groups could potentially offer support to manage sub-convenings and serve as an intermediary between a larger statewide network and a smaller group of entities.
- ◇ **Develop an advisory group or steering committee to guide future planning.** A diversity of ideas emerged around the best way to connect and coordinate statewide food policy entities, ranging from formalizing a statewide community of practice to having annual statewide convenings to creating sub-convenings of similar entities to having something as simple as a listserv or webpage as a starting resource. While there was excitement around connecting

and coordinating there were also concerns about each of the types of strategies for connecting and no one strategy rose to the top. An advisory group or steering committee, composed of members from various types of Washington State food policy entities, could help prioritize ideas and ensure future opportunities are developed with the needs of Washington’s diverse food policy entities in mind.

- ◇ **Explore the lack of food policy entities east of the Cascades and opportunities for growth.** Food policy entities in Washington tend to be more numerous west of the Cascades and there was a sense that rural geographies and populations were less represented. It would be worthwhile to explore why, and whether there are opportunities for growth.
- ◇ **Work against perpetuating inequity and underrepresentation.** In considering strategies for statewide coordination, it will be important to stay mindful of those who might be effectively denied participation by way of historical abuses and mistrust, resource disparities, differences in cultural and communication norms, geographic distance, political context, and more. Strategies should be developed in ways that push back meaningfully against instances of longstanding underrepresentation.
- ◇ **Plan in processes and time for trust building.** Building trust between food policy entities and/or with the Washington State Food Policy Forum may take time and thus should be mindfully incorporated into processes and strategy development. If the time and resources required for trust building are inadequate, it could potentially reinforce or further exacerbate injustice by ostracizing or effectively barring certain perspectives and groups.
- ◇ **Prioritize accessibility.** Whatever statewide coordination ultimately looks like, supporting people for their time and effort will allow for more robust participation. Compensating people for their time and travel expenses and including multiple avenues of participation or attendance could make all the difference for some.
- ◇ **Invest in further monitoring, evaluation, and research.** This initial, exploratory study documented the nuance and complexity of coordinating statewide food policy entities. A deeper, more targeted follow-up study, perhaps with particular focus on Eastern Washington, and urban-rural tensions, would be helpful or possibly even essential, to better understand and catalog the intricacies and capacities of various food policy entities. This could be achieved through application of mixed methods research to explore and catalogue food policy entities in much greater detail, such as research that more robustly documents organizational capacity, strengths, and weaknesses and catalogues goals and or a deep dive into the activities and successes of each entity—pieces that were unable to be accomplished in this initial, short-term study. Similarly, research could explore the lack of food policy entities east of the Cascades and opportunities for growth.

Appendix A – Interview Guide

FOOD POLICY ENTITY INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTRO SCRIPT

[Interviewer introduction] Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. My name is.... (add your own introduction).

- [If there are more interviewers on the call] I also have a colleague on the call today...

[Background] The goal of our interview with you today is to learn about your food policy [organization/group]. We want to learn about how your [organization/group] functions, what its goals and activities are, and what kind of networks your [organization/group] engages with. We would also like to gauge your [organization/group]'s interest in coordinating and communicating with other similar organizations across Washington State, including the State Food Policy Forum.

Like I mentioned via email, this project is being carried out on behalf of the Washington State Conservation Commission, Washington State Department of Agriculture, and the Washington State Food Policy Forum, with funding from the Conservation Commission.

[Expectations and consent] We sent you some consent language via email that had information about your participation, and about recording the interview for our internal notetaking purposes. There was no need to sign anything or send anything back, but did you have a chance to review that email? If not, I'm happy to go over it together now.

- [If they have read the consent document] Great, were you okay with everything you read there, and are you okay with us recording the interview today?
- [If they have NOT read the consent document] By joining this interview, you will be providing your consent to participate in our study. You can choose not to answer any of the interview questions or stop the interview at any time. We ask your permission to include your name/organization's name in our summary report. We also ask your permission to share your name and contact information with our partners at the Washington State Conservation Commission, the Washington Food Policy Forum, and the WSDA. We are asking for this because we hope to help contribute to a growing network of food policy groups in Washington State. We may request to use direct quotes from you, but will provide any direct quotations from your interview for your approval prior to publication. You can choose to remain anonymous if you would prefer.

We will ask your permission to record this session so we don't miss anything, but we will not ever share these recordings outside of the immediate project team.

Do you have any questions before we start?

- [If yes] Answer questions
- [If no] With that, I'll start recording and we'll begin the actual interview.

[Start recording]

[Recording consent] We've started recording – that's still okay with you?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Section 1: demographics and organizational information	
<p>Q1. To start, could you please introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your involvement with [food policy organization/group]?</p>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What is your name?</i> • <i>What is your affiliation to/role with the food policy organization in question?</i> • <i>Why did you join this organization? How long have you been with or known about this organization?</i> • <i>Do you work on a volunteer basis, or is this your main job?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>[If not their main job] What do you do for work?</i> ○ <i>Maybe probe on how many hours per week they contribute or work for this organization.</i>
<p>Q2. Now, I'd like to ask you more about the [food policy organization/group] itself. Can you describe the goals of [organization] and how the organization functions? For example, how does [organization] influence food system related policies, programs, or other efforts?</p> <p><i>[we might know a lot of this in advance if they have a web presence]</i></p>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How long has your organization been around? How were you founded? What's the organization's origin story?</i> • <i>Does your group have a core or driving mission/vision? Goals (a problem they are trying to solve)? (e.g., driven by educational mission – information sharing, engagement mission – coalition building, a policy change mission – action oriented)</i> • <i>Who would you say your organization serves or intends to serve (e.g., groups it is trying to help)? And who does the group see as its primary audience (e.g., groups it is trying to target to implement change)?</i> • <i>What work comprises the majority of what you do? What types of outputs or products?</i>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How is your group funded or otherwise supported? What are your sources of funding?</i> • <i>Can you talk about how often the group meets and what those meetings look like? Who sets the agenda? Are they facilitated or staffed?</i> • <i>[If we haven't found this online prior to the interview] Do you use written by-laws or guiding principles? Do you maintain records (e.g., meeting minutes, list of important events)?</i> • <i>What does being a food policy organization (which you may or may not identify as) mean to you?</i> • <i>Would you say your group is well-known in your community and the communities you serve? What do people come to you for?</i>
<p>Q3. Now, I wonder if you can tell me about your group's membership. How do your members get involved and why?</p> <p>Q3.5. And, who is missing from your group – are there any key people or perspectives you'd like to grow to include?</p>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How many members are part of the group and how do people become members? Is anyone allowed to become a member?</i> • <i>How long do people tend to remain members?</i> • <i>How do you ensure diverse membership (e.g. by sector, by perspective, by identity)?</i> • <i>Does your group have representation from the populations that it targets with activities?</i>
<p>Q4. As you consider the next couple of years or if you had more resources, what would your group want to be doing more of?</p>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>E.g. activities, networking, educating, community outreach or partnership building, etc.</i> • <i>Internal or external facing!</i>
<p>Section 2: current collaborations</p>	
<p>Q5. I'd like to learn about the larger network that [organization] is part of. Can you tell me about any collaborations or partnerships [organization] engages in to get its work done?</p> <p>Q5.5. Why are these collaborations valuable</p>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How are these collaborations built? Preexisting relationships? Outreach?</i> • <i>[If collaborations mentioned have not been specific to WA] Do you engage with WA organizations/partners?</i> • <i>What is the nature of these relationships?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Neighborly? Interpersonal?</i> ○ <i>Political? Strictly professional?</i>

<p>for your group’s goals and work – how do they help your group?</p>	
<p>Q6. Are there rules or standards about which organizations/individuals your group will network or collaborate with?</p>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Do your missions have to align?</i> • <i>Do they need a specific food systems focus or affiliation?</i> • <i>Do you pursue any connections with industry or the private sector?</i> • <i>Do you have to be wary of conflicts in funding/support?</i> • <i>Geographic relationships?</i> • <i>Are these rules/standards clearly documented by the group in some way or are they more implicitly understood by the membership?</i>
<p>Section 3: challenges and barriers to collaboration</p>	
<p>Q7. Next, I’m hoping to hear about the challenges and barriers you face as you try to establish, foster, or maintain collaborations in the Washington food policy space. What are the main barriers or challenges you face when it comes to building partnerships and collaborations?</p>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Differences in goals, priorities, missions, visions, etc?</i> • <i>Time commitment?</i> • <i>Structural and strategic differences?</i> • <i>Funding?</i> • <i>Communication barriers (lack of zoom platform or other)</i>
<p>Section 4: future collaborations</p>	
<p>Q8. Finally, I want to ask a few questions about the future of collaborations and networking for your organization and what might help facilitate that. To start, are there any things your organization would like to be doing that you are not currently doing related to collaborating/networking? [If yes, can you tell us more about those?]</p>	
<p>Q9. [Follow-up to Q8)] Do you see any opportunities to facilitate future collaborations like this?</p>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What might trying to fulfill these goals/this wish list look like for your organization?</i>
<p>Q10. What resources/support would be helpful in achieving these goals relating to collaboration?</p>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Are there any barriers to accessing these resources?</i>

<p>Q11. What do you think about the idea of a greater level of connection among food policy entities across Washington? What would be the potential of a group such as this?</p>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Is your group open to it?</i> • <i>What would that interface ideally look like?</i> • <i>What would be useful or fruitful about a group like this?</i> • <i>Would there be any barriers to participating in a group like this? (e.g., would you be worried that more powerful or state-level organizations would influence your group?)</i>
<p>Section 5: wrap up</p>	
<p>Q12. Is there anything else you want to comment on that we have not covered?</p>	
<p>Q13. We want to make sure that we have interviewed all the right groups in Washington State. Would you mind if I screen shared a list with you to see if you can help us identify any groups we might be missing? (SNOWBALL QUESTION – this maybe need to be an email follow-up given time.)</p>	

EXIT SCRIPT

Thank you so much for participating in this interview. Like I mentioned via email (earlier), I’ll be sending you an online survey shortly to capture some more detail about your organization. Are you the right person to fill that out or can you put me in connection with the right person to fill that out? (It would be great if you could fill that out as soon as possible.)

Thank you again for all your time and expertise! Your input will help us better understand food policy entities in Washington and ultimately encourage collaboration between food systems actors. Assuming you’d like to keep apprised, we’ll be sure to share updates and results of this work! In the meantime, you’re always welcome to reach out with any questions or further thoughts.

Appendix B – Online Survey

SURVEY INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE OF THE SURVEY

This online survey is a supplement to interviews being conducted by the University of Washington Food Systems group with food policy groups and organizations in Washington State. The purpose of this online survey is to learn more about the activities of Washington State food policy and food systems groups and organizations and to better understand perspectives about the needs and opportunities regarding coordination and communication among and between these groups and state agencies.

PROCEDURES

Survey questions will ask about activities that your group is engaging in and about the needs and opportunities that your group perceives regarding coordination and communication among and between food policy groups and state agencies. The survey should take about 20 minutes or less to complete.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

Taking part in this study is voluntary. We will only ask for your individual contact information so that we can reach out in case we need clarification on any of your responses. We will request contact information for your group if your group would be willing to be notified of opportunities related to coordination and communication among food policy groups and between these groups and state agencies. Providing this information is not required and you can participate in the survey without sharing it. You will have the choice of not answering any questions if you do not wish to and you can stop the survey at any time. Using information from this survey and the key informant interviews, we will provide a summary report to the Washington State Food Policy Forum, the Washington State Department of Agriculture, and our contract holder, the Washington State Conservation Commission. A list of food policy and food systems groups willing to be notified should coordination and communication opportunities arise will be shared with these three groups. The report will be posted online on a UW webpage. When we publish results from this study, we will not use any personal information, group information will not be singled out, and the data will be reported in the aggregate.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

The survey will identify areas of need and opportunity for food policy and food systems groups in Washington State to coordinate and communicate and will help state agencies make decisions about whether and how to support these groups.

If you are **18 years or older**, you are welcome to participate in our survey. With any questions or concerns, contact us at ismaca@uw.edu.

Would you like to participate in our survey?

Yes	
No	

Q1. Please enter the name of your food policy group:

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Q2. Please enter the primary contact information for your food policy or food systems group.

[If not applicable, please write N/A in the response box. If you would prefer not to share the requested information, please write "prefer not to answer" in the response box.]

Name (first, last)	
Affiliation	
Email Address	
Website	

Q3. Can we share your group's contact information with the Washington State Food Policy Forum and with our contract holder, the Washington State Conservation Commission, so that your group may be contacted if opportunities arise to coordinate and communicate across and between Washington State food policy and food systems groups and/or with state agencies?

Yes	
No	

Q4. What is the current status of your group?

[Select the option that best describes your group's current status]

Active (meets in person or virtually multiple times a year)	
In development (formed within the last 12 months)	
In transition (meets infrequently or is redefining its purpose or structure)	
Inactive	
Just beginning	
Other (please specify)	
PNTA	

Q5. What is the geographic focus area of your group?

[Select all that apply]

Native, tribal, or indigenous lands	
State/Territory	
Region (e.g., multiple counties or multiple states)	
County	
City or municipality	
Both city/municipality and county	
Neighborhood	
National	
Other (please specify):	
PNTA	

Q6. Select the option that best describes the type of organization that is your food policy or food systems group.

Non-profit (e.g., certified 501(c)3 or other 501(c) category)	
Housed in another non-profit (e.g., a non-profit serves as fiscal agent or group is a project of a non-profit)	
Grassroots coalition	
Embedded in government (e.g., staffed by city or county employee)	
Embedded in a university/college or Extension office	
Other (please specify):	
PNTA	

Q7. What is your group's annual budget?

No budget	
<\$25,000	
\$25,000-50,000	
\$50,000-\$100,000	
\$100,000-\$300,000	
\$300,000-\$500,000	
>\$500,000	
I don't know	
PNTA	

Q8. About how many members does your group include?

[If you don't know, please write "I don't know" in the response box. If you prefer not to answer, please write "prefer not to answer" in the response box.]

PNTA

Q9. What sectors or groups do your members represent?

[Select all that apply]

Government	
Elected officials	
Anti-hunger/emergency food	
Academic (college, university, community college)	
Cooperative extension system	
Economic development	
Elementary and secondary education	
Faith-based organization	
Workers or worker representatives (e.g., farm workers, food service, labor unions)	
Food processing/distribution	
Food production (e.g., farming, ranching, aquaculture)	
Food retail	
Food waste/disposal	
Healthcare	
Philanthropy	
Public health	
Private sector (small businesses)	
Private sector (corporate)	
Social justice	
Youth	
Community member	
Poverty alleviation	
Food service	

Nonprofit	
Native communities	
Native-owned businesses	
Women-owned businesses	
POC-owned businesses	
Other (please specify)	
PNTA	

Q10. What best describes your food policy or food systems groups' connection to government?

Government-driven food policy initiative (e.g. directed and funded by government and/or may get advice from groups outside of government)	
Hybrid model with direct links to government (e.g. endorsed by government and includes dedicated government staff (particularly elected officials) and/or may also receive government funding)	
Hybrid model with indirect links to government (e.g. has informal links with government through department employees and/or may receive in-kind support)	
Food policy organization linked to government through a secondary agency (e.g. the group itself is not formally connected to government, but may have indirect links through government committees or departments)	
Civil society organization with limited government involvement (e.g. community-based group that may include government employees as volunteer members and/or may receive government grants)	
Civil society organization with no government involvement (e.g. community-based group that does not partner with government officials or departments and/or does not seek government funding)	
Other (please specify)	
PNTA	

Q10a. OPTIONAL: Is there anything else you want to elaborate on about your group’s connection to government?

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Q11. Does your food policy or food systems group have working groups (subgroups or committees of people that work on different interest areas within the larger food policy group)?

Yes	
No	
I don’t know	
Not applicable	
PNTA	

Q11a. If your answer was yes, please name the working groups, committees, and/or interest areas.

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Q12. What are the types of tasks in which your food policy group has participated? Please select all that apply.

[Select all that apply]

Learning about policies that govern various aspects of the food system	
Strategizing about policies that affect the food system	
Advocating for food system policy change	
Learning about the needs or problems of the food system	
Learning about groups our members belong to or represent	
Learning about relevant external partners or organizations	
Improving communication with and between external partners and organizations	

Helping to build trust between members, partners, or organizations	
Helping to build trust with the communities our group is trying to support	
Helping to coordinate efforts between our group and other organizations our members belong to or represent	
Helping to coordinate efforts between our group and external partners or organizations	
Other (please specify):	
PNTA	

Q13. Over the past 12 months, your food policy or food systems group has:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not applicable	PNTA
Developed creative solutions to food system-related issues						
Fostered holistic thinking related to the food system						
Accomplished goals that couldn't be achieved by a single organization						
Encouraged practical solutions to food systems related issues						
Encouraged comprehensive approaches to solving food system-related issues						
Connected multiple food-related systems						
Increased access to healthy foods						
Increased knowledge of an/or demand for healthy foods						

Promoted equity within the food system						
Supported economic development						
Promoted environmental sustainability						
Supported resilient food systems						

Q14. What kind of resources, skills, information, or other types of support has your group received or used in the past 12 months?

[Select all that apply]

Data sharing	
Technical assistance	
Partnerships or collaborations	
Educational tools and resources	
Funding	
Community Engagement	
Leadership and facilitation	
Meeting management and support	
None of the above	
Other (please specify):	
PNTA	

Q15. What kind of resources, skills, information, or other types of support would help your group?

[Please select the top four that would be most helpful for your group]

Data sharing	
Technical assistance	
Partnerships or collaborations	
Educational tools and resources	
Funding	
Community Engagement	
Leadership and facilitation	

Meeting management and support	
Other (please specify):	
PNTA	

Q16. Food policy and food systems groups could collaborate with other groups or with state agencies to enhance their impact and effectiveness in addressing food systems issues. Please rank the following types of potential collaborations between groups in order of how effective you think each could be.

Information sharing (e.g., sharing best practices, research findings, resources)	
Networking (e.g., regular online meetings, annual meetings)	
Policy advocacy (e.g., collaborating on advocacy efforts)	
Joint programs and initiatives (e.g., coordinate efforts on joint programs and initiatives, such as educational)	
Data sharing and evaluation (e.g., collaborating on data collection, analysis, and sharing)	
Capacity building (e.g., collaborate on training workshops, webinars, conferences to strengthen skills and knowledge)	
Funding and resource sharing (e.g., pooling resources for joint projects, applying for grants together, sharing equipment or facilities)	
Policy development and implementation (e.g., collaborate on policy development and implementation processes)	
Evaluation and Monitoring (e.g., work together to develop common evaluation frameworks or conduct joint assessments)	
Other (please specify)	

Q17. Are you familiar with the Washington State Food Policy Forum (FPF)?

Yes, I have worked with or interfaced with the FPF before	
Yes, I know of the FPF but have not interacted with them before	
No, I am not familiar with the FPF	
Other (please specify):	
PNTA	

Q17. Please rank your communication preferences for collaboration with other food policy or food systems groups and/or state agencies by indicating your most preferred to least preferred method from the following options:

In-person meetings	
Video conferences (e.g., via Zoom)	
Phone calls	
Email correspondence (e.g., email listserv, Google Group)	
Social media platforms (e.g., Facebook or LinkedIn group)	
Collaborative online platform (e.g., Slack, Microsoft Teams, Discord)	
Written report or documents	
Other (please specify)	

Q18. Would your group like to receive a copy of the final report from this study?

Yes	
No	

Q19. What is your name and email address in case we need to connect with you to clarify any responses on this survey? We will not share your information for any reason except to contact you for clarification.

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Q20. Do any other Washington State food policy or food systems groups come to mind that this project team should try to connect with? If so, please share their names and contact information, if possible:

Thank you for completing the Food Policy Group Survey! This survey was adapted from Ayron Walker's 2019 masters thesis work examining Virginia food policy groups at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and the Food Policy Council Self-Assessment Tool developed by Larissa Calancie from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

We greatly appreciate your time and expertise lent to this work. Please feel free to contact us with any questions or further thoughts at ismaca@uw.edu.

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Appendix C – List of Participating Food Policy Entities

Entity Name	Fit FPE definition?
Agricultural Resource Committee of Island County	Yes
Benton-Franklin Food Access and Security Coalition	Yes
Clark County Food System Council	Yes
Gorge Grown Food Network	Yes
King County Local Food Initiative	Yes
Kitsap Food Systems Round Table	Yes
Okanogan Region Food Council	Yes
Pierce County Agricultural Planning	No
San Juan County Food System Team	Yes
Skagit County Food Policy Council	Yes
Snohomish Sustainable Lands Strategy Team	Yes
South Sound Food System Network	Yes
Spokane Food Policy Council	Yes
Washington Food Coalition	No
Western Washington Food Systems Partnership	Yes
Whatcom Food Network	Yes
Whatcom Food System Committee	Yes