

## **Introduction: The Role and Potential of Food Policy Councils Within the Alternative Food Movement**

*Hunger is not caused by a scarcity of food, but by a scarcity of democracy.*

— Frances Moore Lappé, 1977

Social justice has a new rallying point: food. While the dominant food movement narrative may have veered from its justice-oriented roots, the U.S.-based Alternative Food Movement (AFM) remains concerned with both ecological and social principles (Allen, 1993; Friedmann, 1993; Holt-Giménez & Wang, 2011). Recently, Food Policy Councils (FPCs) have emerged as one of the AFM's more civically engaged activities — democratic, community-based organizations that work to rejuvenate their respective food systems from the ground up (Dahlberg, 1994; Winne, 1994). This qualitative study of the relatively young Rhode Island FPC (RIFPC; established October 2011) reveals how effectively the RI council can foster (food) systems change while embodying its vision of “food justice.” The AFM is not without its more radical critics (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Allen & Hinrichs, 2007; Guthman, 2008); however, little scholarship examines AFM activities in light of our country's rich history of social movements, civic engagement, and community organizing.

I agree with critiques of the misguided efforts and entrenched prejudices of certain AFM activities (Finn, 2012; Fisher, 2013; Redmond, 2013; Yakini, 2012). Yet, as someone trained in policy analysis and active in my local AFM organizations, I find food justice critics unsympathetic to the practical realities of the policy process (Kingdon, 2003). My methodological approach follows in the participatory tradition of similar AFM scholarship, but differs from these predecessors by pursuing a more practice-oriented analysis (Hassanein, 2003; Levkoe, 2006; Lyson, 2013; McCullum, Pelletier, Barr, & Wilkins, 2003; Sbicca, 2012). I suggest RIFPC practitioners are not ignorant of the contradictions inherent in market-based “alternatives,” but instead edge forward pragmatically, skillfully navigating institutions of power. Without slipping into the politics of the possible (Allen, 1999), my assessment of the RIFPC measures effectiveness not in terms of hyperbolic outcomes (e.g. end inequality), but rather by demonstrable change in the political decision making *process*. Building upon McClintock's (2013) call to embrace the AFM's internal contradictions, I submit that FPCs can serve an essential function in bringing reformer and radical camps together, fostering the diverse, political debate that signifies a healthy democracy.

In the sections that follow, I first review prior scholarship on FPCs, justice-centered

criticisms of the U.S.-based AFM, and today's altered ecologies of civic engagement and community organizing. Weaving these threads together, I show how FPCs are not necessarily caught on the neoliberal treadmill — such councils may in fact provide a forum for AFM actors to confront the ideological differences and practical obstacles our communities inevitably present. After describing my qualitative method in greater detail, I frame the ensuing discussion under three themes: 1) professionalization, 2) implicit bias, and 3) engagement ecology. In the spirit of action-research, I close with several concrete recommendations for FPC practitioners moving forward. My study suggests that FPCs certainly have room to improve; for example, exclusionary practices and locally-bound actions will limit their transformative potential. However, at their best, FPCs create a space for the inclusive, genuine participation that a well-functioning democracy requires, as well as the political connections for this civic engagement to produce material outcomes.

### **Food Systems, Food Justice — Food Democracy?**

A review of the extensive scholarship and activism that informs the AFM is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, issues of corporate consolidation, health disparities, ecological damage, and worker abuse are among those AFM advocates strive to address (Friedmann, 2004; Garcia & Altieri, 2005; Harrison, 2004; Hendrickson, Wilkinson, Heffernan, & Gronski, 2008; Imhoff, 2010; Neff, Parker, Kirschenmann, Tinch, & Lawrence, 2011). Here I focus on more recent developments in food systems planning, including FPCs and community food security (CFS), as well as the food justice critique of these approaches. I also contextualize my study within the social movement, civic engagement, and community organizing literatures, which help describe where along the reformist to radical spectrum (McClintock, 2013) FPCs currently fall, and hint at where they might progress. While food systems practitioners tend to coax change from within the powerful institutions that be, food justice activists generally prefer to dismantle structural barriers and create more equitable alternatives. I posit that FPCs can bridge this gap, between policy making and community organizing, in potentially transformative ways.

The term “food system” reveals an innovative approach to addressing food-related inequities (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 2000). Systems-thinking underscores the interdependent features of an entire “foodshed” (Kloppenborg, Hendrickson, & Stevenson, 1996), such that local consequences are traced to global catalysts, health issues are linked to employment patterns, or environmental concerns are incorporated within agricultural goals, to list a few

examples (Koc & Dahlberg, 1999). Food systems planners acknowledge the inseparability of food, ecology, and sociopolitical institutions, and, therefore, seriously consider these interactions when devising new practices (Anderson, 2008; Gottlieb, 2009; Lyson, 2004).

Similarly, community food security (CFS) advocates expand upon the official “food security” definition, which is characterized as all persons obtaining, at all times, a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through local, non-emergency sources (Sen, 1993, as cited in Gottlieb & Fisher, 1996), by underscoring the intersecting social factors that affect entire communities. By extension, CFS considers the community in question to be the most appropriate source for solutions (Pothukuchi, Joseph, Burton, & Fisher, 2002). CFS actors are largely credited for the proliferation of North American FPCs, following their drafting of the Community Food Security Empowerment Act to be included in the 1996 Farm Bill (Gottlieb & Fisher, 1996). The Community Food Projects Competitive Grants that Congress eventually authorized (P.L. 104-127) “fight food insecurity through developing community food projects that help *promote the self-sufficiency of low-income communities*. Community Food Projects are designed to ... create systems that *improve the self-reliance of community members over their food needs*” (US Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2009, emphasis added).

Critics have questioned whether these minimally-funded, disparate entities should work to forge “self-sufficient,” “self-reliant” systems, as opposed to directly confronting the Farm Bill’s overarching power, not to mention immigration law, tax regulations, or trade policy, all of which significantly impede localized efforts (Guthman, 2011). FPC members themselves are not blind to the limitations of grants or markets, but rather remain acutely aware of the organizational, budgetary, and political barriers they confront (Fisher, 2013; Harper, Shattuck, Holt-Giménez, Alkon, & Labrick, 2009; Hatfield, 2012; Schiff, 2008; Vallejo, 2013).

Radically-leaning AFM activists and scholars focus on the systemic origins of food-related inequalities, defining food justice as “the right of communities everywhere to produce, process, distribute, access, and eat good food regardless of race, class, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, ability, religion, or community” (Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, 2012). Food justice advocates assert that most AFM activities do not demand transformation nearly enough (Allen, 2008; Guthman, 2011; Mares & Alkon, 2011; Slocum, 2006). Consumption-oriented practices in particular, for example farmers’ markets, generally reflect and reproduce extant class and race inequalities, while policy-oriented actions, such as FPCs, tend to alienate and exclude already marginalized groups (Allen & Hinrichs, 2007; Finn, 2012; McCullagh, 2012; Peck, 2013; Yakini, 2012).

These diverging camps within the AFM are illustrative of the tensions produced when

social movements struggle to remain both popular and disruptive. I briefly highlight the following sociology and political science literature to point out how the progression (or digression) of the AFM follows a well-documented pattern. Scholars have demonstrated how social movement organizations dynamically frame issues as a means of increasing their participant ranks (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). Movement outcomes are thus highly contingent upon how flexibly issues are framed and how wide the recruitment net is cast. The success of a particular social movement may, paradoxically, lead to the institutionalization, deradicalization, and, in turn, disempowering of said movement (Belasco, 2007; Meyer & Tarrow, 1998). Food justice critics are reacting to a phase quite familiar to social movement scholars, when radical movements smooth their edges and appear more sophisticated (i.e., professional) in their efforts to appeal to a broader spectrum of members.

Casting a wide recruitment net does not necessarily lead to institutionalization or disempowerment, however. History suggests that it is the transition from “big tent” to slick offices that draws social movements away from their radical roots and toward more reformist directions, exacerbating implicit biases in the process. In her extensive study of American civic engagement, Skocpol (2003) argues that this country’s shift from federated, membership-based associations in the 1830s through the 1950s, to single-issue, professionally-managed advocacy groups beginning in the 1960s, eroded the democratic nature of our society. Federated organizations recruited dues-paying members across class and state lines, met regularly around social and political causes, elected and prepared local leaders for regional assemblies, and ultimately brought a broad range of regular people’s concerns to the federal agenda (Skocpol, 2003). Many of these federated organizations integrated racially and by gender only after the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s (or fell out of vogue entirely). Yet, as Skocpol laments, the newly styled “advocacy organizations” that emerged in the 20th and 21st centuries had splintered into highly specialized groups, led by relatively privileged Americans with professional staffs, speaking on behalf of their “memberless” constituents. Skocpol challenges today’s advocacy and “grassroots” organizations (the latter of which remain financially beholden to professional grant writers and private foundations) to instead generate direct participation from a broader range of residents. Returning, thus, to real membership, she contends, would not only make for more relevant policymaking, but also revitalize this country’s legacy of civic engagement in truly equitable, democratic ways.

Studies of U.S.-based community organizing (Smock, 2004; Orr, 2007) provide deeper insight into the potential trajectory of FPCs, in particular. Community organizing engages disenfranchised residents in public issues, both within the political arena and out, ultimately

expanding and equalizing the democratic process. Underscoring how marginalized residents have always been excluded from meaningful democratic participation, Smock (2004) argues that genuine political engagement requires equal access not simply to voting booths, but also to direct participation in the public decision-making process. Her in-depth, qualitative study of 10 different groups reveals two major limitations to community organizing: 1) its locally-bound sphere of influence and 2) its reliance on formal organizations as vehicles for change. Smock concludes that innovative, collaborative relationships between complementary models would best enable community organizations to overcome their place-based limitations and, hence, more effectively contribute to the broader social movements that generate systems change. As I will explore further in the discussion below, FPCs may serve as one such complementary model.

Orr's (2007) conceptualization of a "local *ecology of civic engagement*" (p. 3, emphasis in original) is particularly apt in my study of a food-related social movement organization. He defines the ecology of civic engagement as "the terms by which major community and institutional sectors of a city relate to one another and their role in the structure and function of local political regimes," emphasizing "the interrelationship between community sectors and their broader civic, cultural, economic, and political environment" (p. 3). Orr and colleagues build upon Smock's (2004) work, noting how place-based, contemporary community organizing groups face new and complex challenges that their mid-20th century predecessors did not. Corporations are not bound to single cities, local political decisions are reached via opaque networks of economic elites, and advocacy groups have become more fragmented and narrow in focus — all of which limit the reach and effect of traditional community organizing efforts. A more ecological sort of engagement might close internal AFM gaps and bridge external movement connections, working at the intersections of civic culture to holistically improve our living environments.

Do FPCs hold this potential to revitalize, and give shape to, the participatory democracy that social progressives seek? The RIFPC's explicit focus on equity remains rare among North American FPCs; most focus on local production or public health without addressing underlying social disparities. RI's council developed from community food security thinking and advocacy, wherein equal access to food remains as important as, if not more important than, food provenance. This justice-orientation is evident from language in the RIFPC's original vision: "We envision a Rhode Island where safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food is accessible and affordable in every RI community, and in which an increasing proportion of the state's food supply is raised, caught and processed locally" (RIFPC, 2011). I submit that councils that

embrace a similarly comprehensive, justice-centered mission, and whose membership accurately reflects the communities they represent and serve, can model the innovative and inclusive “civic organizing” group, or “food democracy” movement (Hassanein, 2003), that certain social scientists and AFM practitioners value.

### **Methods and Materials**

I elected a qualitative approach; such rich, in-depth data capture the nuance that quantitative methods might obscure (Burawoy, 1998; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006; Stake, 1995). I drew heavily on feminist action-research as well, acting and observing along with my RIFPC peers while acknowledging how my particular subject position shapes my perceptions (Eubanks, 2009; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007; Smith, 1987). Brown and colleagues’ (2010) conceptualization of “policy ethnography” — the study of a social movement that includes “organizational and policy analysis alongside ethnographic observations and interviews, and operates with a policy goal in mind” (p. 101) — also greatly informed my methodology.

Three sources of qualitative data were triangulated: 32 in-depth interviews (19 RIFPC members plus 13 members from 11 other North American FPCs), 45 hours of participant-observation, and content analysis of online and printed materials. The research protocol was reviewed by my university’s institutional review board (IRB) under the exempt category 2, and was determined to be exempt from the human subjects regulations due to the low-risk nature of the research. Table 1 lists the 11 other councils with inclusion rationale. In the interests of space and clarity, here I focus on RI’s council exclusively; the larger project from which this paper stems included comparative case studies of three other councils.

My interview questions raised members’ personal trajectories into food-related work and evoked individual perspectives on their respective FPCs’ functionality as organizations. I also worked to reveal participants’ expectations and intentions behind joining a FPC. RIFPC members were interviewed in person while North American FPC members were interviewed via phone, with one exception, which was conducted in person. All interviews were audio recorded with participants’ informed consent.

Table 1. North American food policy councils (all interviews conducted spring 2013)

ORGANIZATION NAME	RATIONALE
Baltimore (MD) Food Policy Initiative	In cooperation with Johns Hopkins University's Center for a Livable Future, maintains an interactive, multi-layered food system map, with a particular focus on urban food access issues, citing an "holistic and comprehensive food systems approach" (Baltimore City Government, 2010)
Dane County (WI) Food Council	County-level independent council established in 2005; 2011 restructuring to maintain its viability as an entity of Dane County government resulted in increased viability (Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, 2012; DCFC member, personal communication, fall 2013)
Madison (WI) Food Policy Council	Interviewed at the suggestion of the Dane County Food Council
Detroit (MI) Food Policy Council	Explicit focus on food justice (Detroit Food Policy Council, 2009)
Hartford (CT) Food System	One of the oldest U.S.-based organizations, founded in 1978 (Hartford Food System, 2013)
Knoxville-Knox County (TN) Food Policy Council (KCFPC)	Another of the nation's oldest organizations, founded in 1982 (KCFPC member, personal communication, spring 2013)
Los Angeles (CA) Food Policy Council	One of the first FPCs to include food worker justice in their policymaking (Los Angeles Food Policy Council, 2012)
Massachusetts Food Policy Council	Regionally similar, state-level council that has adopted different FPC structuring - housed in the state legislature as opposed to RI's independent governance (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2012)
Oakland (CA) Food Policy Council	One of the model councils informing RI's FPC design process (RIFPC member, personal communication, spring 2012)
Toronto Food Policy Council	Known among food scholars as a model FPC (Blay-Palmer, 2009)
Food Policy and Programs, Portland (Oregon) Bureau of Planning and Sustainability Portland-Multnomah Food Policy Council (dissolved late 2012)	One of the earliest U,S,-based FPCs, the work of which is now integrated into city planning (Former PMFPC member, personal communication, spring 2013)

I attended all public RIFPC meetings as a participant-observer and joined the “Thriving and Just Food Economy” work group. After being elected work group chair in November 2012, I became an “official” member of the RIFPC and attended their closed meetings for the year of 2013. Meetings were not audio recorded; I relied on my detailed field notes, meeting agendas, and minutes for subsequent coding and data analysis. Field notes included both purely descriptive observations and editorialized commentary. This paper does not reference my observations from closed RIFPC meetings, per members’ requests. I wrote notes by hand during all meetings, to blend better with other members who participated without laptops. My notes included as much word-for-word conversation as I could capture; most analysis occurred later, when I typed and organized my field notes.

In addition to meeting agendas and minutes, content analysis materials included website copy and (online) documents published by each FPC. All materials were coded for how members and organizations conceive of food systems work, as well as the role government and policy making plays in social change. My goal was to tease out the ability of a reformist-type organization (FPC) to act upon radical-type goals (food justice). First, I transcribed interviews word-for-word and typed hand-written field notes into coherent prose after each participant-observation. Next, I carefully read each transcript and field entry, highlighting repeated words and phrases, such as “local,” “access,” or “community food security.” After marking these repetitions, I re-read each transcript for conceptual patterns, noting themes like “community-based versus government-driven,” “fear of the unknown,” or “limits of political engagement.” Drafting concept memos, around thoughts such as “faux antiracism” (L’Hôte, 2013) or “professional advocacy,” helped elucidate my subsequent theoretical framework. I included a code for myself in an effort to trace my own process, biases, and (hopefully) growth as a volunteer-member. Content analysis materials, namely website text and FPC publications, were also read carefully and repeatedly, but ultimately provided this study’s “factual” evidence (e.g. council goals), whereas interview transcripts and field notes offered the more nuanced context surrounding such “facts” (e.g. why and how council goals emerged). From these deliberate readings the following three themes surfaced: 1) professionalization, 2) implicit bias, and 3) engagement ecology.

Triangulating interviews, participant-observation, and published content helped address some of the limitations to my approach, though notably this study omits by default all those unaware of or uninterested in FPCs. FPC website copy reinforced interviewee comments or meeting observations, for instance, while interviews clarified vague publication content. Coding for myself enabled me to distinguish and acknowledge my positionality as someone critically

supportive of AFM activities, both academically and personally. The three themes explored below were selected for their repeated, consistent appearance across this study's dataset.

### **The RIFPC in Theory: Design History**

The following brief history of the RIFPC provides context to the discussion immediately following. Prompted by the USDA's Community Food Projects Competitive Grants, and with the support of private foundations, a small group of self-selected RI professionals — the design team — spent approximately one year (2010) creating a FPC for RI. The RIFPC-to-be would not be housed within the state's departments of health, environment, or planning, but staff from a number of state agencies would sit on the council. Such an unofficially official membership would loosen the council from the bureaucratic and political restraints of state office, while preserving immediate links to high-powered public servants. Council members would represent food system stakeholders from agriculture to waste, including anti-hunger advocates and for-profit entrepreneurs, food safety scientists, and public space designers. This diverse composition would serve to remind everyone of the greater food system operating behind each individual's component node of expertise, pushing participants to work together toward systems change. Finally, unlike other FPCs, which focus on "local" to the detriment of "access," the RIFPC would distinguish itself by emphasizing that CFS "isn't about having enough food, it's about having local food systems [address social] equity" (founding RIFPC member, personal communication, 2013).

In terms of content, the 14-member RI design team relied upon their combined professional expertise to craft the following four goals for the council, each of which would have a corresponding work group (which would be comprised of volunteers rather than nominees):

1. Every Rhode Island resident will have access to safe, fresh, affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food, regardless of income or race.
2. A continuously increasing proportion of Rhode Island's food supply will be grown, raised, caught, processed and distributed in Rhode Island.
3. Rhode Island's food system will cultivate a healthy environment by striving for zero waste, adopting ecologically sound practices and ensuring healthy working conditions.
4. The Rhode Island food system's contribution to the state's economy will increase and will equitably benefit all Rhode Island residents. (RIFPC, n.d.)

The RI design team then commissioned a state food assessment — compiled by a NYC-based consulting firm — drafted by-laws, and invited additional food system professionals, bringing the membership total to 16. The official launch of the RIFPC took place on “Food Day” (October 24, 2011) at the State House, complete with speeches from RI’s first lady and a founding member of the Community Food Security Coalition<sup>1</sup>. Below, I explore the extent to which the RIFPC’s practices reflect their goals.

### **The RIFPC in Practice: Themes Observed**

My analysis of RIFPC practice falls within three themes: 1) professionalization, 2) implicit bias, and 3) engagement ecology. The first two, professionalization and implicit bias, are described and critiqued here as core tendencies of this particular AFM organization, illustrated by field notes and interview excerpts. The third, engagement ecology, I present as a framework for the recommendations that follow, exploring the potential for multi-issue, relationship-based networks to transcend traditional social institution and movement barriers.

#### **Professionalization**

This section’s observations call attention to the ways the professionally led RIFPC may be undermining our broader intentions. I employ the term “professionalization” to describe the seemingly white-collar office culture that permeates RIFPC activities, signified by meeting agendas and minutes, the formations of committees and sub-committees, and their tendency to gather in office spaces during the 9-to-5 work day, among other indicators. These particular council members seem caught between their desire for (progressive) systems change and their familiarity with (suppressive) bureaucratic process. I posit that professionalized, foundation-dependent civic groups circumscribe an alienating form of “participation” that appeals mainly to members who share the same class and educational backgrounds as their founders (and funders). This implicit restriction on participation shortens the reach and thus limits the impact of FPCs.

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<sup>1</sup> The Center for Science in the Public Interest, a prominent DC-based advocacy organization, created Food Day in 2011, which has been celebrated nationwide every October since. RI’s own Division of Agriculture Chief (and FPC member), Ken Ayars, sits on Food Day’s AFM all-star Advisory Board, along with celebrities and influential actors such as Jane Fonda, Will Allen, Michael Pollan, Marion Nestle, Alice Waters, and U.S. Senators Tom Harkin and Jon Tester, among many others. See <http://www.foodday.org>.

The RIFPC reaches decisions by consensus as a means of mitigating power imbalances around the table. Council members' laudable commitment to consensus building comes into question given their opaque design process. The first open meeting of the RIFPC, for instance, took place after the design team and council members had multiple, closed meetings. As if exclusively inclusive, the RIFPC spent this first public meeting presenting their co-created vision, mission, and goals, all of which had been previously devised by members-only consensus, to "the public" (field notes; January 30, 2012). The inaugural open meeting ended with the RIFPC electing council officers and sub-committee chairs from amongst themselves, according to their pre-established by-laws, leaving those of us sitting in "the audience" feeling slightly left out. I do not suggest that a volunteer-run organization must write by-laws by consensus with the entire population of its community, but I do wish to examine the RIFPC's decision to abide by these formal structures. Employing bureaucratized elements, such as meeting facilitators and mission statements (not to be confused with visions or goals), signals and reproduces a particular classed process of convening. Such rituals risk alienating less conventional but highly effective actors, a division which, in turn, undermines this council's commitment to social equity and delays the broad political support that precipitates policy change.

The RIFPC intentionally created itself outside of state government to avoid the budget axe as well as the bureaucratic processes that impede progress, as experienced daily by the state staff members who also sit on the RI council (RIFPC member, personal communication, 2013). Despite their wariness of such rituals, the RIFPC persists in self-imposed protocol. Potential members and volunteers, thus, either have to be already quite comfortable with "bureaucratese," or else exceedingly confident in expressing their objections to this sort of professionalization. The professional culture that comes so reassuringly easily to most RIFPC members might explain why so few advocates, activists, and allies from "other" social milieu have yet to engage.

The design team's decision to hire a NYC-based consulting firm for the RIFPC's state food assessment provides another example of a possibly alienating form of professionalization. CFS co-founder Andy Fisher describes community food assessments as a means of engaging

residents in the process so it wasn't a top-down exercise. We saw [community food assessment] as kind of a great tool to ... avoid projects being led by a professional staff ... It would set up a process in which those folks would be engaged after the assessment was over in implementing those results, (as cited in Holt, 2013, n.p.)

Community-led food assessments take considerably more time and energy than “outsourcing” to a professional organization, and one could argue that, in some cases, “opportunity costs” outweigh the benefits of participatory efforts. The RI design team found it judicious to delegate the assessment project rather than further delay the RIFPC’s establishment; the council could support localized, community-based assessment efforts later (RIFPC member, personal communication, 2012).

Producing a slick report may curry favor with a more powerful audience. The RIFPC bears no decision-making authority, but its members are able to leverage their personal and professional connections to even more highly connected power brokers, which, in a state as small as RI, often means separation of one degree. One of my RI interviewees, who was not part of the original council, observed:

I think the people on [the RIFPC] are pretty well respected in their specific communities and probably on a state level, maybe even a national level ... And when you can make policy from that level ... when you have a group that comes together, looking specifically for issues and ways to fix them, I think it takes a burden off of government [and] also digs deeper into things that wouldn’t even have been explored ... [This] probably contradicts what I just said, but it’s at that level because we have a bunch of people [on the RIFPC] who are already ... associated with those really high-level institutions. (RIFPC member, personal communication, 2013)

Having pursued this “high-level” course, the RIFPC faces a longer, more arduous task of earning the general public’s trust and regularly engaging a wider range of ordinary, average residents. Treading the line between polished-enough-for-the-professionals and flexible-enough-for-the-marginalized has proven difficult. As of May 2013, the RIFPC still struggles to engage volunteers who are not already employed by, or conducting research on, local food systems. A FPC dominated by mainstream leaders also runs the risk of merely “tinkering with the status quo,” as a more recently nominated RI council member remarked (personal communication, 2013), rather than substantially shifting institutions.

Progress has emerged from the RIFPC’s bravely imperfect efforts. Several council members are seasoned community organizers and social justice activists who recognize that building legitimacy runs in multiple directions. Equal participation from traditionally marginalized residents might render this council legitimate to members of said groups, but it is the presence of esteemed local “experts” who seal the RIFPC’s legitimacy in the minds of influential power brokers. The RI design team certainly could have done more to cultivate a genuinely grassroots

organization. However, their assembling of respected RI leaders opened an important door to political decision makers. By holding their official launch at the state house and inviting elected officials and nationally recognized CFS advocates, the RIFPC leveraged their political clout to create a “respectable” vehicle for progressive social action. Maintaining direct links to elected officials and high-level public administrators are useful and powerful tools unique to FPCs, as opposed to other AFM activities. How FPCs exercise their powers, and whether councils are fairly and truthfully calling for their community’s self-identified needs, remains uncertain. The danger to democracy arises when these “most privileged Americans ... organize and contend largely among themselves, without regularly engaging the majority of citizens” (Skocpol, 2003, p. 178).

### **Implicit Bias**

Just as the RIFPC’s professionally-dominated membership tends toward a professionalized organization, their predominantly White, middle-class composition defaults to a particular brand of ideas. Research on such “implicit bias” offers persuasive reasons to critically examine and, at the very least, acknowledge how today’s less overt forms of prejudice continue to taint assumptions and limit approaches (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). For example, presiding over the FPC’s official launch, the first lady of RI publicly hailed the council’s assumed efforts “teaching people on SNAP how to eat healthy [sic]” (field notes, October 24, 2011). As food justice critics argue, such problematic proclamations betray widely-held beliefs that people in receipt of SNAP benefits do not (know how to) eat “healthy” and require instruction from those more privileged, educated, or even enlightened (DuPuis, 2007; Guthman, 2008). My interview and participant-observation data evidence how several council members work to avoid racist and classist generalizations, but RIFPC event and meeting content generally “targets” low-income populations in stigmatizing ways, further alienating those marginalized by our dominant (food) system.

Meeting content frequently verged on divisive, especially as visions of CFS seemed necessarily to revolve around SNAP and WIC. I do not suggest that AFM organizations halt their important work to increase federal benefit enrollment or abandon efforts to incentivize fresh produce purchases at farmers’ markets. However, as a researcher, I have learned how the Black Panther Party created this country’s first free breakfast program for children in direct opposition to federal programs; co-founder of the Black Panther Party, Bobby Seale, affirmed, “We realized that regarding hunger, the bread crumbs they were throwing at us was only to

pacify us, to keep us quiet. It wasn't to sustain us" (as cited in Heynen, 2009). Thus, a wider range of sociopolitical viewpoints might take offense to, or wish to re-examine, the RI council's generally unquestioned endorsement of federal food programs. Many early council gatherings revolved around increasing SNAP and WIC spending at farmers' markets, for example. The RIFPC's lone member of color (who was neither African American nor in receipt of federal benefits, incidentally) remained the only one of my RI interviewees to voice dissent:

I refuse that we [people of color] should be at the end of the can [speaking of canned food as opposed to fresh]. And I've challenged the food policy council. We were talking about WIC, we were talking about SNAP and all of that and I kept saying: 'why is that *where we are placed?*' (personal communication, 2012, emphasis added)

Fostering a space where unconventional, uncomfortable questions are safely raised and thoughtfully discussed remains difficult for the RIFPC. My interviews also revealed how other, more established councils continue to wrestle with contentious issues:

If you want people who are from different pockets of society to be in the room, you're going to have conflict, even if it's not outright, spoken conflict, there's this conflict. Someone doesn't speak up ... not because they don't have anything to say, [or not because] they feel like they can't get a word in. There are people sitting in the room, in a lot of these groups, I think, and I've observed, that are actually just angry. They're not talking because they're just angry. They're angry because you're not going to hear them anyway and even if you do what are you going to do about it? Nothing. So folks show up, but they may not talk. And ... it can be so subtle, but it happens. (Oakland FPC member, personal communication, 2013)

To be clear, RIFPC members are not blind to the systematic oppression of our neighbors. Directors of the RI Community Food Bank, the state's SNAP outreach program and the Environmental Justice League, to name only three examples, confront the tangible consequences of hunger, victim-blaming, and institutional racism on a daily basis. Their desire to respectfully incorporate perspectives of marginalized residents proves laborious to navigate, regardless. Certain council volunteers plainly understand the difficulty of inclusive organization:

We talk a lot about diversity and being representative of the RI population and stuff, and I don't think people understand that you can't just invite people to come to a meeting. There's a lot of work that needs to be done to get that to happen, and so there might be a little bit of dreaminess, of this vision and of what it will be, especially in terms of being

representative and diverse and what not. ... [And] people don't really want to be singled out that way. ... Oh yeah, all those low-income people, but wait – you're the low-income person! You're the oppressed, you don't understand that you're oppressed?! You don't see that?! [laughs]. (RIFPC member, personal communication, 2012)

As this interviewee observed, the RIFPC placed itself in a precarious position, where we must remain explicitly committed to low-income residents without stigmatizing such communities in the process. At meetings, events, and during several interviews, food insecure RI residents are almost exclusively spoken of in negative, pitying terms: hunger, discrimination, inaccessibility, etc. “How could that possibly be empowering?” one council member demanded of me (personal communication, 2012).

Based upon my 32 interviews with all 11 FPCs included in this study, little to no participation from low-income residents remains a common characteristic. One seasoned food systems scholar and practitioner remarked:

Poor folks, by and large, don't get deeply involved in the creating of policy. They'll advocate for policy, they'll go to meetings and make cases and sign up to speak and all that, but when it comes to being recruited for a body to make policy, I don't think that's likely to happen. (Dane County FPC member, personal communication, 2013)

According to Skocpol's (2003) research, politically influential membership associations of the 19th and early 20th centuries attracted participants and mentored leaders across class lines. Given this historical reality, and without understating the challenge of genuine citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969), I wonder how FPCs might be reconfigured, assuming broader participation is indeed a shared goal. Studies on implicit bias suggest that simply accepting that our subconscious prejudices exist and that we are all guilty of them, helps mitigate their destructive influence (Bogado, 2013). FPCs are promising insofar as they cultivate spaces where a diversity of voices and ideas can be challenged, or they foster places where implicit biases are made explicit.

## **Engagement Ecology**

Ecology of civic engagement refers to how “major community and institutional sectors of a city relate to one another,” emphasizing “the interrelationship between community sectors and their broader civic, cultural, economic, and political environment” (Orr, 2007, p. 3). This section

frames the recommendations immediately following; I suggest that a deeper, ecological sort of civic engagement might strengthen the RIFPC's practical capacities without sacrificing their radically-leaning edges. RI's council took an encouraging step in espousing a food *systems* approach by recognizing the cross-cutting nature of agriculture and health, but the approach falls short of explicitly linking RI's food inequities to local, national, or global sociopolitics, among other broader conditions. The complexities of today's social problems drive activists and advocates into ever more narrow and, hence, seemingly more attainable, issue groups in precisely the kinds of ways that prevent transformative shifts. Harkening back to the social movement and political science research that frames this paper, wider recruitment need not compromise organizational goals. As context for my ensuing recommendations, here I mention briefly the under-utilized method of (politically savvy) relationship building, raising the potential of "engagement ecology" to bridge connections between single-issue movements and build powerful, global alliances across socially progressive organizations (Duggan, 2003; Orr, 2007).

During the RIFPC's earlier gatherings, in particular, members readily acknowledged how fundamental issues, such as poverty, exacerbate nearly all other social injustices; yet, they remained markedly resistant to unconventional approaches that might address such problems at their root. I frequently witnessed mostly middle-class FPC participants speak gravely and pointedly about RI's widening income disparity and double-digit unemployment rate, but these same individuals would respond quite negatively, or not at all, to suggested engagements with other RI-based organizations that were working to raise the minimum wage, for instance. "We are *not* an activist group!" an RIFPC volunteer nearly shouted during one meeting (field notes, July 20, 2012).

In our first one and a half years, the RIFPC has primarily celebrated our establishment, debated next steps, and provided networking opportunities for local food movement leaders. However, toward the end of my field work, I noticed new council members expressing greater enthusiasm for distinctly political, perhaps ecological, forms of engagement:

I really appreciate the size of [RI] and the fact that it's feasible to be in ongoing conversation with people about what's happening in different sectors - even [with] just the people in the room I feel like we could do three degrees of separation to anyone else in the state. And that feels hugely powerful and really exciting, too, politically. I know from experience it's really hard to get new ideas onto the agenda of old-guard folks in RI, but [the council] feels like a real opportunity. (RIFPC member, personal communication, 2013)

Orr (2007) and others have evidenced how organizations like FPCs would bolster their theoretical and practical strengths via sociopolitical engagements with civic life's multitude of ecological interrelationships. Moving in a promising direction, the RIFPC now actively participates in regional research and action groups such as Food Solutions New England. While this method of outreach remains food-centric, the RI council's new willingness to cross political borders portends significant, movement-building outcomes.

### **Recommendations for FPC 2.0**

I humbly present the following set of recommendations to help RI and other FPCs reconcile the observed rift between the public and policy. The first, "membership before management," echoes Skocpol's call for less professionalized, genuinely democratic means of civic participation, and addresses practical funding barriers. Next, "cultivate relevance" and "innovate inclusively," speak to the multiple conceptions of legitimacy described in the professionalization discussion above, and mitigate the implicit biases encountered in many RIFPC activities. Lastly, "think global, act translocal," further underscores the power and potential of engagement ecology, wherein multi-issue social movements leverage relationships rather than harbor disagreements. Ultimately, I hope "FPC 2.0," described in more detail below, will move more freely between the incremental world of policy making and the transformational vision of systems change.

#### **Membership Before Management**

FPCs' financial sustainability remains an immediately pressing concern. Esteemed organizations, such as the UN, publicly demand "paradigm shifts" in the world's food system, and, yet, most FPCs continue to depend upon some combination of tenuous government support, resource-draining private grant applications, and volunteer exploitation (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2013; see also De Schutter, 2014). A member of one relatively successful FPC opined:

We're setting up nonprofits to fail right now and we have unrealistic expectations on what they can accomplish. Government should be doing a lot more of this work. As should the business community, [they] should be working more responsibly in certain aspects. (LAFPC member, personal communication, 2013)

Expectations aside, nonprofits' dependence on external funding limits their (political) capacity as well. As Skocpol (2003) notes in her U.S. civic engagement research:

[M]any of today's 'community organizations' or 'grassroots' undertakings are not quite what they seem. Sparked by well-connected leaders, they frequently have — or soon obtain — outside funding from tax-exempt private foundations. There is nothing wrong with this, but *we should not imagine that it is a fully democratic arrangement* (p. 228-229, emphasis added).

Opening FPC membership and leadership opportunities to folks from a full spectrum of class and educational backgrounds and charging annual dues, as was typical of 19th century federated associations, are possibilities worth exploring. Ideally, instituting sliding scale or barter/exchange fee structures would not preclude low-income residents' membership. Members might pay based on their ability, offer meeting refreshments or other small services in exchange for membership, or perhaps explore a free "trial" membership before committing financially.

### **Cultivate Relevance**

The RIFPC has organized numerous, well-attended public events, but as of May 2013, our presentations continue to attract the "usual suspects" (i.e., highly-educated, middle-class, predominantly White individuals), none of whom are elected officials. I recommend the RIFPC, with its wealth of dedication, expertise, and professional contacts, host community-wide listening sessions and roundtables (following the Los Angeles FPC model), then compile these disparate community-identified needs into a coherent whole to present back to the state's legislators. Elected officials might also be invited to observe and listen at such RIFPC events, creating a physical space where constituency building meets policy making. Reaching out to other RI-based organizations that have a social equity or civic engagement focus might provide additional opportunities to engage "unusual suspects," simultaneously building solidarity and a wider base of public support, as housing, labor, and food activists voice and discover their shared concerns and potential alliances. A member from one of the earliest North American FPCs remarked during our interview:

When thinking about a [FPC] 2.0, ... I would want some very intentional actions towards increasing voice and more broadly defining the term "expert"... It's a different lexicon, but

it's the same message when we talk to a public health person versus a city planner versus a person that experiences food insecurity every day. [Elements of participation need] to be integral to this policy work ... Would a really radical food justice policy be to support a higher minimum wage? ... Is that really what we should be talking about? Not transportation and food access, but how do you get people out of poverty? (Portland FPC member, personal communication, 2013)

As observed throughout my RI study, reformist members will resist radical directions; this inevitable tension may allow for a “professionalization” exception, wherein hiring anti-oppression and allyship facilitators could prove more productive than alienating.

### **Innovate Inclusively**

Government-affiliated FPCs not only shorten the distance between a proposal and the power to enact it, but also add some requisite reality to the equation. Certain members of the RIFPC have decades of experience operating within the obstructions produced by legislatures, agencies, and universities, among other bureaucracies. Given such firsthand knowledge and personal relationships, the RIFPC occupies an ideal position: we can bend the ears of influential lawmakers to a degree the average resident likely cannot, and, simultaneously, guide radically-inclined activists in a more effectual direction. The lived experiences of traditionally marginalized residents, on the other hand, can reveal innovative, unconventional approaches that “high-level” actors might not have considered. This “inside-outside” strategy (LAFPC member, personal communication, 2013) can spark profound, structural changes, provided that sociopolitical elites are mindful of their positional biases and that marginalized participants are respectfully heard. In the thoughtful words of another New England FPC member:

We believe that the recommendations we put forth have a basis in community need. But we're basing that on the fact that [members],....by virtue of the work of [their] organization, have a certain finger on the pulse of what's going on. But that is a filtered need. And I think that it's hugely important to get at notions that are a little less filtered. (Hartford Food System member, personal communication, 2013)

Regarding council membership diversity, the Detroit FPC's practice of including community residents at large, who become members by virtue of their “expertise” as eaters, seems another approach worth replicating. Anti-oppression and allyship training may again be crucial in easing

this transition to greater inclusivity.

### **Think Global, Act Translocal**

Those who dismiss AFM activities for glorifying the individual or “the community” in distinctly depoliticizing ways argue a valid point (DeFillipis, Fisher, & Shragge, 2010; Hyatt, 2011). Nevertheless, mass mobilization of systems-changing social movements has occurred in this country (e.g., Civil Rights Movement). These transformative movements depended on charismatic, national leaders as well as extensive networks of anonymous, local advocates (Ransby, 2003). The “food sovereignty” movement, moreover, continues to thrive because of autonomous, smaller groups that belong to a broader web of activist organizations (Patel, 2010; Wittman, Desmarais, & Wiebe, 2010). In order to build the kind of mass social movement that policy makers must contend with, I believe FPCs must expand their scope and widen their lens, bridging translocal alliances with labor activists, housing advocates, and environmental stewards, among other social progressives, as left-feminists have argued for decades (Duggan, 2003; Rowbotham, Segal, & Wainwright, 1981). Accessible teach-ins that explore the successes and setbacks of translocal movements like food sovereignty may productively guide collaboration-averse members out of tunnel vision.

### **Conclusion: The FPC as Quiet Revolution**

In many ways, a FPC is the radical notion that governments are people. Unlike market-based AFM activities, which reduce *citizens* to *consumers*, FPCs build a bridge between the general public’s needs, on one side, and legislative and regulatory actions, on the other. In my observation, FPC members remain committed to addressing the vast problems that plague modern society to an admirable — and crucial — extent that disengaged homesteaders or self-satisfied shoppers do not (Matchar, 2013; Szasz, 2007). Such councils, to date, might have tended to reform rather than radicalize, but through their more incremental processes, they are wrestling with political institutions and policy making apparatuses in brave, thoughtful ways that more contentious disruptions might not sustain. Moreover, unlike lobbyists or single-issue advocates, FPCs facilitate a systems-wide approach to similarly complex matters. At this early stage in the RIFPC’s formation, I did not find demonstrable change in the political decision making process, but I do see great potential in FPCs as vehicles of participatory democracy. Organizing FPCs can become a political act once councils meaningfully and intentionally

include a broad spectrum of members in practice.

In closing, I offer social justice scholars and activists a thought from one of the RIFPC's founding members:

When I heard the theory of community food security, I got it. I was like: 'Oh, this is really important.' It's so practical at one level, *and revolutionary in a quiet way at another level.* It's not showy. It doesn't talk about justice; so, nobody is oriented towards defensiveness, It talks about security. It has everyone at the table; no one is excluded. It can only work if everyone is at the table. It had built into it a systemic change as opposed to just simply an episodic action. It was really insisting on a very sophisticated model of intervention. I think [the community food security founders] were so wise. One of their vehicles was a food council, and it had many different iterations, but I thought it would be fun to figure out a food council in RI that was actually structured to address community food security and hold that tension. (RIFPC member, personal communication, 2013, emphasis added)

Provided FPCs commit to diverse and innovative engagement, this particular AFM activity provides a space and means to forge resilient networks and return powers of governance to the public. I find something genuinely hopeful in the (re)convening of (food) policy councils, where people interact, learn, strategize, and craft viable, equitable alternatives — civil subversives stirring a quietly potent revolution.

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