



Planning for Sustainable Food Systems in Canada

Summary of Findings from a Survey of Canadian Planners

Introduction

Food systems are integral to community health and well-being. However, critical considerations about food have been overlooked in contemporary planning activities and processes in Canada. Reasons for not engaging in food planning can be linked to lack of knowledge and awareness, limited budgets and a perceived lack of influence over the food system. Planning innovations and research have emerged over the last two decades to build awareness about food systems in the planning field. However, this work has been limited in scope and few studies have examined the unique planning contexts in Canada.

To address this research gap, Kwantlen Polytechnic University’s Institute for Sustainable Food Systems (ISFS) partnered with the Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP) to administer a survey of Canadian planners. This critical partnership allowed the ISFS to engage directly with the planning community and help disseminate results to professional planners and practitioners. The survey was developed with the support of an advisory committee of professional planners and practitioners from across Canada. These advisors represented different geographical contexts and planning sectors. They provided valuable advice and insights throughout the survey development process.

Acknowledgments

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Survey & Demographics



435

Professional planners and practitioners from across Canada

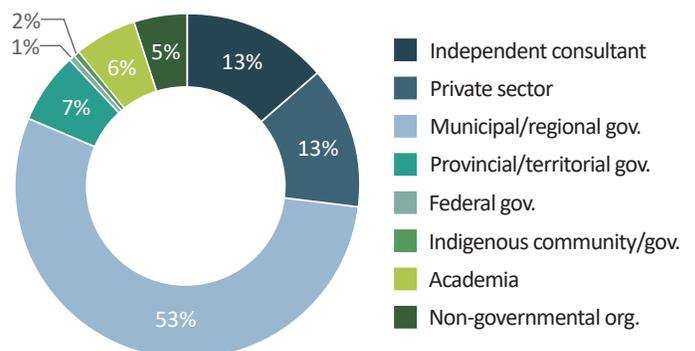
The survey collected responses from 435 professional planners and planning practitioners. These respondents represented a diversity of geographic regions across Canada with the majority of responses collected from Ontario and BC.

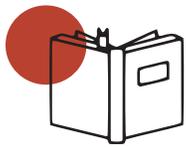
While respondents represented a variety of planning sectors, the largest group of respondents worked in the local government sector (53%) and land use and development planning were the top areas of planning focus. Respondents included professionals at various career stages including current students, early and mid-career professionals, as well as senior level planners, and departmental leads.

The majority of respondents were white (62%). Eighteen percent of respondents identified with a racial minority group including respondents who identified as mixed race. Survey respondent were also relatively young with 56% of respondents under 35 year of age.

Respondents by Sector

What planning sector do you primarily work in?





Education & Training



23% of respondents *took food related courses*
67% of respondents *did not take food related courses*

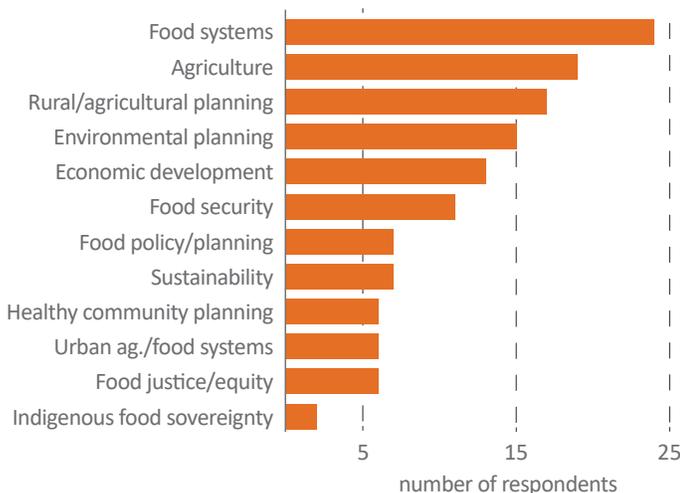
Formal Education

While dedicated courses and independent study opportunities for students are emerging, this study found that the majority of respondents (67%) did not take food related courses during their formal education. For respondent who had received a planning degree, 72% did not take food related courses during their planning education.

For those who took food related courses during their formal education, courses primarily increased awareness and provided exposure to new topics. Food systems courses were commonly identified as being taken by respondents. This included both courses where food systems was a primary focus or where food systems were addressed in some way. Respondents also commonly took production related agriculture courses as well as courses addressing rural and agricultural planning. A few respondents also took courses in emerging food systems topics such as; food systems policy, food security, urban agriculture and food justice. Some respondents noted that when food related courses weren't offered, they pursued independent study opportunities, research and coursework to expand their knowledge and understanding of food systems planning.

Food Related Course Themes

Common food related course themes by number of respondents



A food course wasn't offered so I, along with two other students interested in food planning, planned our own course on the topic, creating our own reading list and activities. The goal is to learn more about the intersections of food systems, social justice and planning.

- Survey Respondent

While nearly one quarter of respondents indicated taking food related courses, few of the opportunities described provided information and skill development in the field of food systems planning.

Professional Development

Many respondents relied on professional development offerings outside the planning field to build knowledge about food systems. This included attending conferences and webinars hosted by non-planning organizations and volunteering with food related groups. Professional development opportunities primarily increased awareness about food systems issues and trends.

Eighty-five percent of respondents expressed interest in participating in new food related professional development opportunities offered within the planning field. Accessible and affordable online courses and webinars were commonly requested along with best practices, case studies and written policy guides.

The most common topic requested by respondents was focused on how food systems relate to other areas of planning work. Other highly requested topic areas of focus included, food security, Indigenous food sovereignty, and urban food planning.

Top 5 Topic Areas for Food Systems Planning Professional Development

- 1 How food systems relates to other areas of planning
- 2 Providing general food systems information to support planning
- 3 Food security (e.g. general information, metrics etc.)
- 4 Indigenous food sovereignty and food planning approaches
- 5 Food systems planning approaches for urban communities

What is Food Systems Planning?

Moving towards a coherent and shared understanding of food systems planning is a critical step towards enhancing education and professional development opportunities in Canada. To support this, respondents shared insights about how food systems planning in Canada could be defined.

Respondents noted that food systems planning must occur across scales considering important regional, national and global implications. The importance of implementation and program development was also highlighted, in addition to focusing on the creation of new food policies. It is also recognized that food systems planning plays an important role in addressing vulnerabilities and building resilience within local communities.

Respondents communicated the critical involvement of different stakeholders in food systems planning. The critical involvement of advocacy groups, community organizations and academics in the policy development process was highlighted.

“ Policy is a key piece of the equation for me, but the focus on policy with no mention of community initiatives or advocacy is problematic for me.

- Survey Respondent

Justice and equity were all recognized as necessary outcomes of food systems planning. Respondents also recognized the need to meaningfully engage in processes of decolonization and actively support Indigenous food sovereignty when planning for food systems. This includes acknowledging the ongoing impact of planning activities on Indigenous food sovereignty and traditional foodways.

“ Without an explicit connection between food systems work and the impacts of colonization on Indigenous Peoples, a definition is incomplete. We need to be clear about how all areas of planning further contribute to colonization and erasure of Indigenous Peoples.

- Survey Respondent



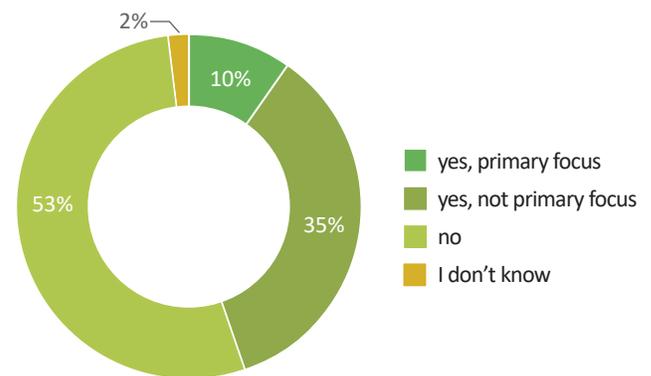
Food Systems Planning in Practice

Who is involved in food systems planning?

Ten percent of respondents indicated that food systems planning was a primary part of their work. Thirty-five percent indicated it was part of their work, but not the primary focus. It is important to note the possible selection bias that could result in a higher number of people involved in or interested in the field of food systems planning responding to the survey.

Involvement in Food Systems Planning

Are you involved in food systems planning?



About half of local government planners were involved in food systems planning, however only 3% or 6 respondents indicated it was a primary focus of their work. The small number of local government planners involved in food systems planning may reflect the emerging nature of local food systems planning at the local level. When comparing involvement in food systems planning by job title or position, a greater percentage of senior level and mid-level planners indicated that food systems planning was a primary part of their job when compared to managers and departmental leads.

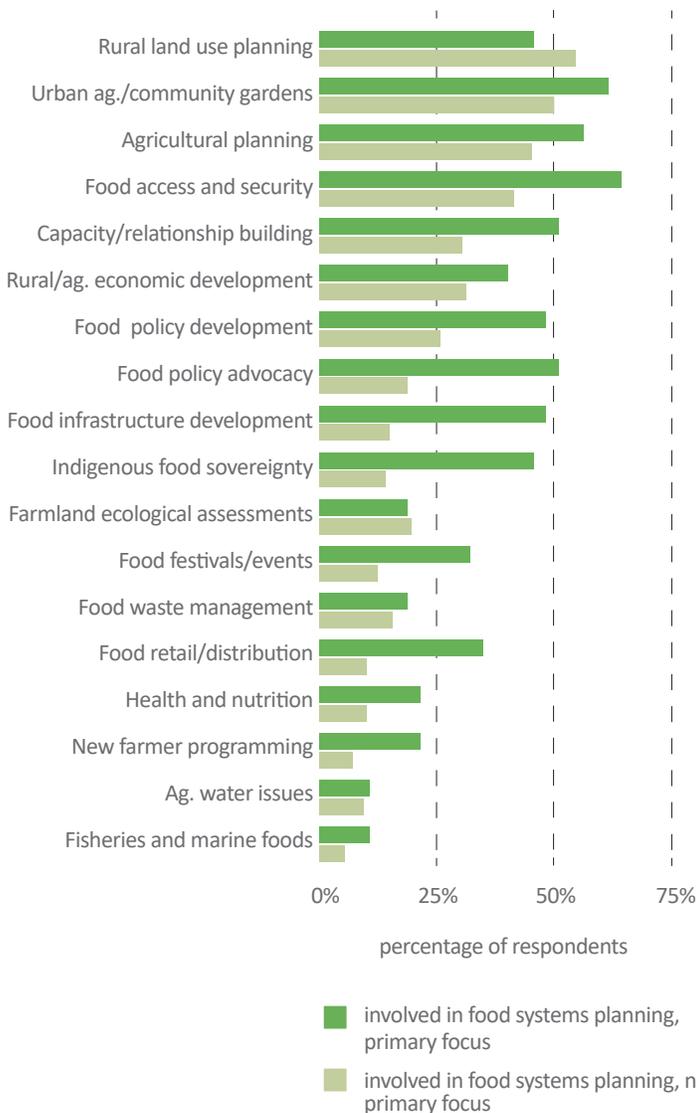
A greater percentage of white respondents were involved in food systems planning. However, a greater percentage of respondents from the racial minority group indicated that food systems planning was a primary focus of their work. The group of respondents categorized “racial minority” included all non-white respondents including those who identified as Indigenous and mixed race. The small percentage of non-white respondents suggests a lack of diversity in the planning field generally.

Areas of Food Systems Planning Focus

For respondents who indicated that food systems planning was a primary focus, food security and access, urban agriculture and agricultural planning were top areas of focus. Capacity/relationship building and food policy advocacy were also ranked high. These respondents were more focused on some areas than respondents who worked in food systems planning as only part of their work. For example, those primarily focused on food system planning had a greater focus on food policy development, Indigenous food sovereignty work and food infrastructure development. For respondents who worked on food systems planning as only part of their work, rural land use planning was a primary area of focus.

Food Systems Planning Foci

What areas of food systems planning do you focus on in your work?
Please check all that apply.



Knowledge, Tools and Resources

Local level plans and policies emerged as the tools most often used in food systems planning work. The emphasis on local level tools reflects the high number of respondents working in the local government sector. Other tools not listed but mentioned by respondents included climate change assessments and projections, community engagement and Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

The most common sources of information and knowledge were local and provincial government agencies followed by NGO’s, and published journals or case studies. The majority of respondents (79%) gained knowledge about food systems planning through the course of their work. Many also gained knowledge and skill by actively seeking out new information and research and attending both planning and non-planning conferences. About one-third of respondents had lived experience that helped them engage in food systems planning. This commonly included personal experience farming or growing up on a farm. A small number of respondents indicated they had lived experience from experiencing food insecurity or challenges accessing culturally appropriate food.



Knowledge of Food Systems

The survey asked respondents to rate their level of knowledge for a series of food system topics. Respondents were most knowledgeable about urban agriculture/community gardens, health/nutrition and agriculture. Respondents reported the lowest level of knowledge in fisheries and marine food systems, Indigenous food sovereignty, food workers and labour movements, and legal frameworks for food systems planning.

Assessing knowledge across all topic areas, 11% of respondents had a high level of knowledge, 68% had an adequate level and 21% had a low level of knowledge. While this data provides only a cursory assessment of planners’ knowledge across a range of food system topic areas it suggests that there are few experts in the field, and that critical knowledge gaps still exist amongst planners.



Barriers & Knowledge Gaps

Barriers

Limited knowledge about food systems amongst planners was identified as a top barrier. Food security, market drivers, economic impacts and Indigenous food sovereignty were identified as areas where knowledge was limited. Competing planning goals and priorities was also identified as a top barrier. In particular, respondents noted that priorities in the development sector were identified as a point of conflict when it comes to food system development. Lack of political support and guidance and limited budgets and capacity for food systems planning were also top barriers. Even if planners had an interest in pursuing food systems planning work they are often constrained by the specific mandate of their role or department and a lack of clarity around who is responsible for food system planning.

“ Those making decisions have limited knowledge of how food systems and food security is a critical piece of planning and government policy making.

- Survey Respondent

Planners also recognized their limited influence over the food system as a barrier. In some cases, community organization were recognized as leaders, resulting in a more diminished role for planners. Respondents noted that planners may also have few opportunities to engage in food systems work due to unclear departmental or jurisdictional responsibilities.

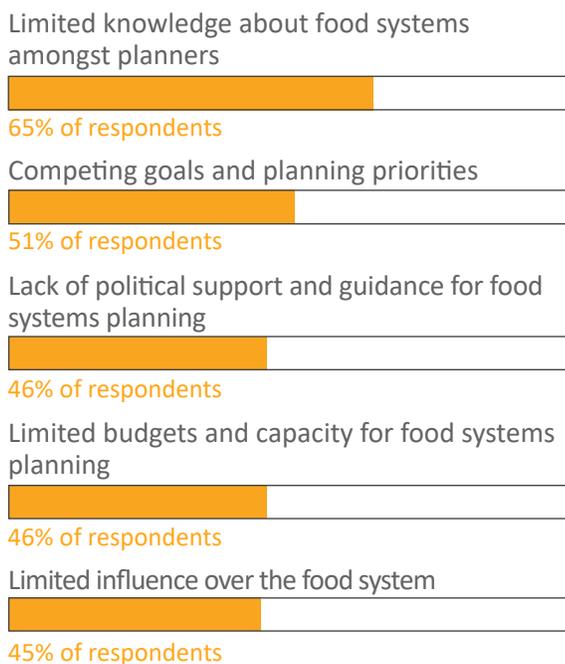
“ In my experience as a planner, I can only operate within a very narrow mandate which almost always excludes food systems planning.

- Survey Respondents

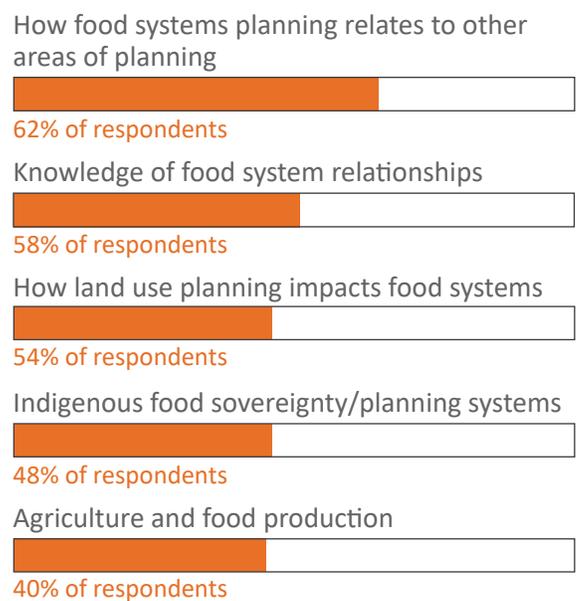
Knowledge Gaps

How food systems relate to other areas of planning emerged was the most significant knowledge gap selected by respondents. This was followed by knowledge about food system function and relationships. Respondents identified limited understanding of key linkages between social, ecological and economic outcomes in the food system. How land use planning impacts the food system was also identified as a top knowledge gap. While respondents ranked their knowledge about agriculture and food systems as relatively high in the self-assessment, agriculture and food production was still identified as a knowledge gap amongst planners.

Top 5 Barriers to Advancing Food Systems Planning



Top 5 Food Systems Related Knowledge Gaps Amongst Planners





Conclusions & Next Steps



Food is everywhere and nowhere when it comes to planning, and often falls through the cracks.

- Survey Respondent

The survey revealed interest from planners in the emerging field of food systems planning. At the same time there are institutional, jurisdictional and systemic challenges that affect the development of the field and the involvement of planners. Action from planning institutions, academics, governments and planners themselves is required to address the following challenges:

Knowledge about the food system is limited amongst planners: While knowledge of some food system topics is high, few planners have a broad range of food system expertise. In particular, knowledge about critical topics such as food infrastructure, Indigenous food sovereignty, and food systems labour are limited. Planners also recognized a lack of knowledge about how to integrate food systems into their other planning work and policy and regulatory tools to support food systems planning. Respondents identified the potential to learn from other communities and practitioners as important for building knowledge and expertise in the field.

Formal education and training opportunities in food systems planning are limited and inadequate: Respondents engaged in education and training opportunities to build skills and knowledge about food systems, however these opportunities were narrowly focused and do not address critical knowledge gaps. Planners expressed interest in learning more about emerging topics and areas of concern including food security, food justice, urban food policy and Indigenous food sovereignty. They also identified a need for training and resources that help planners to communicate better with decision makers and the public, and integrate food systems planning into their work across planning domains.

There is a lack of clarity around who is responsible for food systems planning: While food systems cut across a number of policy domains, respondents suggested that there is often no clear “home” for food systems in planning departments and agencies. The lack of clarity when it comes to jurisdictional responsibility for food

systems planning was also noted. Planners recognized the important role of community organizations in food systems planning and a need for resources to help planners better support community-based food system initiatives.



I honestly never thought about food systems as even part of the planning realm. I would have assumed that as a federal agriculture jurisdiction. As urban farming becomes more of interest I think that's when some of these topics might be introduced but never really thought about it at all.

- Survey Respondent

Food systems planning is perceived as a rural issue, not and urban one: There is also evidence that food systems planning is perceived as primarily a rural issue. Rural land use planning and agricultural planning were top areas of focus for respondents. While there is a focus amongst planners on urban agriculture and community gardening survey results suggest that urban food planning remains narrowly focused in these areas. There is also noted a lack of training and education opportunities in the area of urban food policy and planning.

A recognized lack of racial diversity and lived experience in the planning field could impact how food systems are understood and limit how they are addressed in planning: Equity and justice were identified as important outcomes of food systems planning. Emerging equity based planning approaches and work to address racism, decolonization and Indigenous reconciliation present new opportunities to mitigate systemic inequities to improve food system outcomes for all. Respondents also identified the importance of decolonization and Indigenous planning approaches in advancing food systems planning.

The survey helped to understand that planners and practitioners in Canada are increasingly aware of the complex nature of food systems planning, growing food system inequities, and the connections between food system outcomes, climate change, equity and community well-being. Raising the profile of food systems planning within the field could help create new opportunities for education, training and networking and ultimately help build more just and sustainable food systems in Canada.

For more details and to access the full project report, please visit: <https://www.kpu.ca/isfs/planning-sustainable-food-systems>