Food Systems Planning in Canada:
Priority Practices Summary

This toolkit summarizes interviews with planning practitioners in 14 communities across Canada about their food systems planning activities, successes, and challenges. It highlights a series of process-related priority practices to help guide planners in advancing food systems planning in their communities.

Conditions Supporting Food Systems Planning

Political Will: Elected officials, facilitating funding, dedicated staff time, policy development and other resources are examples of factors influenced by political will that can advance food system planning.

Autonomy: The degree to which practitioners have the necessary authority and autonomy to carry out food systems work without excessive oversight or policy barriers is important to the success of their food planning efforts.

Community Support: Community support is highly influential in the outcome of food systems planning efforts. Positive or negative public opinion can contribute to project or program success or failure.

Local Champions: Committed, passionate individuals who "champion" food systems work and carry it through the planning and decision-making processes greatly helps initiatives to succeed.

Governance: The structure of decision-making in an organization impacts how food systems planning can occur. As there is no single best structure, understanding the decision-making context in an organization and thinking about how to integrate food systems is likely to be most effective.

Priority Practices

1. Setting a Vision for Your Food System

a. **Identifying a core motivator:** Connecting food systems planning to community motivations and goals helps build political will, and prioritize programs and decisions in the planning process. Engagement across diverse stakeholders in the community helps to define the most significant needs that can guide food systems planning in communities. Examples of primary motivators include reducing food insecurity, addressing climate change impacts, improving community sustainability or resilience, achieving increased food self-reliance, bolstering economic development, and preserving agricultural heritage.

b. **Embedding food in comprehensive plans:** Including food in comprehensive plans (such as Official Community Plans, Regional Growth Strategies, and Master Plans and Municipal Development Plans) clearly establishes it as a priority for the organization. Specific, tangible strategies can then also be outlined in a food-focused policy document such as a Food System or Food Security Strategy. For even greater integration of food in a community's planning approach, food systems should also be embedded in other focused policy documents (eg. an official transportation plan) and bylaws at various levels.

c. **Centering equity:** Negative food system outcomes disproportionately impact Indigenous, racialized and less affluent communities; adopting an equity-based approach to local-regional food systems planning and development is therefore imperative. Some examples of equity practices are: recognizing and supporting marginalized community leadership, taking time to build relationships with diverse communities and naming and addressing ongoing white privilege and dominancy culture within organizations.

2. Dedicating Resources

a. **Staff and time:** Communities can dedicate entire positions to food systems planning. This role's entire portfolio is made up of food systems work. The position can be internal - within local government, or external - through a non-profit or arms-length organization. Both models can be effective but must have designated funding and structures to support the role.

b. **Funding:** Having funding explicitly dedicated to a food portfolio or food planning activities supports consistent, more thorough food systems planning work. Dedicated funding can include a piece of or an entire operating budget dedicated to food planning activities, funding earmarked to carry out specific plans, strategies or projects, and/or grant programs designated for food initiatives.

3. Championing Food Systems Work

a. **Food policy councils:** FPCs can play an instrumental role in coordinating activities across various food systems sectors (such as grassroots, non-profits, local government, health authorities and academia). FPCs can use their position as a network hub to best understand the range of community needs and utilize this information to inform their policy recommendations.

b. **Education and advocacy:** Currently, food is not usually a major consideration in many planning projects or strategies due to an unclear understanding of the intersections between food systems and other traditional planning priorities. A significant responsibility falls on the planner with food systems in their planning portfolio to highlight these connections, build interest and buy-in from other decision-makers, and ultimately situate food as a valid and pressing priority in significant planning decisions. Disseminating information to the broader public on the impacts of food systems in generating community well-being is also crucial in developing community awareness, political will, and inspiring action in food system development. In addition, local governments have a role to play in advocating for food systems to higher levels of government.

4. Collaboration

a. **Coordinated planning across local government departments:** As food systems touch most traditional planning domains - transportation, sustainability, housing, etc. - food systems planning work is strengthened when efforts and objectives are coordinated across various departments. Breaking out of the silos that commonly exist and integrating planning efforts between departments will not only advance food systems work but make for more resilient and robust communities in general.

b. **Coordinated planning with other government entities**: Concentrations of food production, processing, transportation and consumption rarely occur within the same community (or even region), so understanding how relationships between communities support the greater region is important to successful food systems planning efforts. Additionally, it is also important to understand food system objectives, strategies and actions taken by regional, Indigenous, provincial and even federal governments, and to explore the intersections and synergies these might nurture.

c. **Meaningful collaboration with stakeholders:** Bringing together non-profits, local champions, and industry representatives to share, discuss, and plan aligns decision-making with community needs. Gathering input from all types of voices ultimately improves the likelihood of developing successful, long term food system solutions that meet the needs of the affected land and population. Collaboration can be formal or informal and should be built on trust, genuine interest and mutual respect.

5. Monitoring, Evaluation and Knowledge Sharing

a. Integrating local metrics: Data collection is an important component of developing public policy and monitoring its impacts. Local-level food systems metrics across food consumption, agriculture, environment and economy should be integrated with existing local-level data on health, affordability and community well-being to present a more comprehensive picture of local-level food system outcomes and connections.

b. Monitoring, evaluation and reporting practices: In order to be most effective, a policy or program's efficacy must be evaluated regularly and adapted as required to changing conditions. This requires effective monitoring, evaluation and reporting. Monitoring and evaluation could involve developing and monitoring indicators that show progress toward stated goals, regular reports and progress updates to Council, or, a more formal evaluation process at predetermined intervals.

c. Effective communication and knowledge sharing: Innovative and successful food systems planning work is happening across the country. However, planning practitioners may not have the time to network and learn from peers or know where to access relevant resources and networks. Dissemination of results can often be achieved through partnerships with community organizations or networks that have pre-existing media and communications channels to reach a broader audience. Academic partners may also have resources to compile and disseminate this data.

Final Considerations

Though this toolkit underscores the importance of embedding Indigeneity and equity across all planning work, in every community, it should be acknowledged that a different set of priority practices may better reflect the needs and challenges of Indigenous and Northern communities.

Community context is important and implementation of the priority practices presented within this toolkit will look different in each community. As a result, planners, who have intimate knowledge of their community and priorities, challenges and potential, will need to shape these practices to best fit their needs. Sharing their successes and challenges through communities of practice and working with their peers across the country to refine and develop further priority practices will more quickly advance food systems planning as a discipline in Canada.

For more information:

This toolkit was developed as part of research conducted in partnership with the Canadian Institute of Planners. This partnership broadened the reach of the initial phases of the research, allowing the development of this document to be based on a diverse set of insights and lessons from across Canada's planning community. Detailed results of this research, as well as a longer toolkit that includes real world examples of priority practices are available on the project website:

https://www.kpu.ca/isfs/planning-sustainable-food-systems

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