

Exploring Elements of Food Policy Interventions: Findings from Nationwide Survey Research on Municipal Stakeholders

Objective

The purpose of this research is to better understand current and potential food policy work at municipal sustainability offices across America.

Research Questions

We surveyed municipal sustainability offices throughout the United States to explore three primary research questions:

- How do staff at municipal sustainability offices conceptualize and execute activities related to food and sustainability?
 - Which specific activities do they engage in (e.g., educating, providing technical assistance, developing or implementing policies and programs)?
 - Which topics do they cover (e.g., farming techniques, food waste, local food promotion)?
- How attractive and feasible do staff at municipal sustainability offices consider specific potential policies or programs related to food and sustainability?
- Which barriers related to promoting plant-based food choices do staff at municipal sustainability offices identify?

In a slightly different vein, we also asked the following:

- Which avenues for connection between DEIJ issues and plant-based food choices do staff at municipal sustainability offices recognize?

Methods

Participants and Procedures

We set parameters for our sample by first identifying at least three mid-size cities in every state and conducting internet research to determine whether an appropriate contact existed in each city. Our list expanded as other suitable cities came to light through our research or as contacts could not be identified in selected cities. To recruit survey respondents, we obtained a list of email addresses for 267 sustainability office employees from 103 cities throughout the United States. For another 23 cities, we used general email addresses, such as info@, as we could not identify a specific contact person. While the primary focus of this study was to examine the efforts of sustainability offices, we also included 36 sustainability and food councils, related organizations, and external programs that could play substantial roles in shaping sustainable food programs, policies, and decisions in their municipalities. We incentivized participants who certified that they could legally accept an incentive as a government employee with a \$30 Visa gift card. Fourteen of the 50 participants accepted the card.

We designed the survey to elicit information about current practices and perspectives on potential activities related to food policy. The survey asked for not only respondents' own views but their presumed perspectives of other key stakeholders, such as city staff, residents, and vendors. We divided it into three topic areas: (1) practices currently pursued by respondents' offices or external programs, (2) opinions of various stakeholders on specific practices related to food policy that are of interest to advocates, and (3) barriers to implementing such practices. One question pertained to the relationship between plant-based food choices and issues relating to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ). Additionally, an open

question asked respondents to share any suggestions they might have on the topic of sustainable food. Both open and closed questions elicited information about current practices and stakeholder views on potential practices, while open questions alone elicited more-nuanced answers relating to barriers and intersections with DEIJ.

We used Qualtrics to deploy the survey, which stayed in the field from February 25 to March 18. The survey yielded 89 total responses from 29 states, of which 50 were completed. Two were 74% completed, 11 were 37% completed, and 26 were 17% or less completed. Considering the survey's structure and the organization of questions by topic, we included quantitative survey results from surveys that were at least 37% completed (63 surveys). A map in the appendix demonstrates the variability of respondents.

Analysis

We conducted a thematic content analysis of our open questions. This involved reading through all responses for each open question and developing a code book for each that categorizes responses by theme. Two researchers developed the code books and then, independently of each other, coded all responses. Comparison of coding between the two researchers revealed 77% agreement. The researchers discussed the remaining responses until they reached agreement. Our thematic analysis was inductive; that is, we developed themes on the basis of participant responses rather than predetermined theory. It was also semantic, in that the themes were "identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data," and the analyst did not look for "anything beyond" what a participant had said or written. We conducted a basic, descriptive statistical analysis of our closed questions, the results of which we share below.

Results

RQ1: Current Sustainable Food Activities of Municipal Offices

The activity that respondents most commonly reported engaging in was promoting food choices that would increase sustainability in the community or other contexts (70%). The second most reported

was educating the public about the relationship between food and sustainability (62%), and the third was conducting or using a life-cycle assessment of emissions (13%).

Our analysis of open responses about municipalities' other sustainable food practices and policies revealed six categories of activity. Most respondents reported activities generally describable as *tracking or managing data related to greenhouse gas emissions from food, public education and outreach campaigns, technical assistance, policy management, external partnerships, and food-choice-focused programs established by sustainability offices*. Most reported interventions related to public education and outreach (31%) and programmatic efforts (19%). Managing policies to increase local sustainable food options (11%), providing technical assistance (9%), and tracking food-related emissions (8%) were less reported.

The activities identified largely focused on four topics: food growing, food accessibility, food waste, and food consumption. The most common focus of the sustainable food activities reported above were food growing (33%) and food waste (22%). Only 16% of the activities focused on food consumption. Of these activities, only 28% promoted plant-based foods. Activities that focused on promoting plant-based foods included "specific goals related to promoting local foods and a plant-based diet in the 'Sustainable Lifestyle' section" and "emphasis on benefits of plant-based diets." Respondents who discussed food growing focused on activities related to supporting local agriculture (e.g., community gardens, farmers markets, community-supported agriculture) and local food. Examples of this include "maintain a community farmers market, food hub, and food rescue service," "Chickens & Bees Ordinance, local food bid discount," and "partner with community garden groups, provide on-the-ground workshops in our food forest, offer food trees." Food waste encompasses the actions involved in disposing of and managing food waste. Examples of this include "a Save More Than Food food-waste prevention campaign," "we offer rebates on compost units purchased," "GHG emissions from organics disposal," and "support for food rescue and other ways to divert organics from landfills."

Key Takeaways

1. While many sustainability offices view food as relevant to sustainability, the majority are in the early phases of work in this area. As a result, much more focus is on “low-hanging fruit”—activities relating to education and outreach or programs that support local initiatives, such as community gardens and eat-local campaigns. Although some offices are pursuing policies, most are not at this stage.
2. Most offices consider food sustainability efforts in terms of food growing and food waste rather than food consumption. When offices do address food consumption, they often focus on production location rather than type of food.

RQ2: Beliefs About Potential Policies or Programs Related to Food and Sustainability

Respondents demonstrated a preference for activities that assist and incentivize the public in making sustainable food choices rather than mandate behaviors. They thought that incentivizing vendors, concessionaires, and other food providers to offer plant-based meal options was most feasible (65%) and committing to the Good Food Purchasing Program second most feasible (62%). They perceived taxing purchases of meat-based products as least feasible (2%). Similarly, respondents thought committing to the Good Food Purchasing Program was most attractive (60% very/extremely attractive) and creating a Green Purchasing Program second most attractive (58% very/extremely attractive). Across stakeholders, participants believed sustainable food programs and policies would be least attractive to vendors and city staff and most attractive to sustainability-plan decision-makers and survey respondents.

Beliefs about the acceptability of outreach about plant-based food varied according to framing: Only 10% of respondents believed it was moderately or highly acceptable to conduct an outreach campaign about the animal welfare impacts of consuming meat, compared with 26% and 34% for campaigns about the health and environmental impacts, respectively. Support was low for the following

programs: ensuring all the city’s catered events are meat-free (2% moderately or highly acceptable) and making vegetarian or vegan options the default at municipality events, with the option to request meat (4% moderately to highly acceptable). Support was slightly higher for encouraging local restaurants and grocery stores to make sufficient vegetarian and vegan options available and to advertise these options as much as other products are advertised (20% moderately or highly acceptable); conducting an outreach campaign that involves providing vouchers to residents that they can use to purchase discounted vegetarian meals at local restaurants (16% moderately or highly acceptable); promoting Meatless Monday, advocating that residents go meat-free at least one day per week (34% moderately or highly acceptable); and developing a website providing residents with resources on how they can reduce their meat consumption (24% moderately or highly acceptable).

Key Takeaways

1. While there are many stakeholders to consider (several of whom are included in the complete dataset), a surprisingly large number of respondents felt that decision-makers connected to their sustainability plan would be supportive not only of general recommendations and activities related to plant-based foods but of more-specific programs, such as the Green Purchasing Program and the Good Food Purchasing Program.
2. As might be expected, the least favorable option was instituting a meat tax, which was found to be both unattractive and infeasible by the majority of respondents.
3. Even though key decision-makers might find some plant-based initiatives attractive, it is important to note that respondents found such initiatives less feasible than attractive. Reasons often given for this included limited capacity, concerns over stakeholder reactions, and competing priorities. Any actions that advocates can take to make these types of initiatives more feasible, perhaps working with a broader coalition to create materials or building relationships that might reduce hesitations, should be considered.

RQ3: Barriers Related to Promoting Plant-Based Food Choices

Regarding our open questions about barriers to promoting plant-based foods and the feasibility of specific activities, we identified five categories of barriers that could be divided more broadly into hesitations and constraints. Of the hesitations, respondents reported on the sociopolitical context as well as past failures. Of the constraints, respondents reported COVID-19, structural barriers, and limited capacity. All respondents identified at least one barrier, and many expressed two or more barriers.

We found that the barriers associated with hesitations most commonly reported by sustainability office staff concerned sociopolitical (32%) and structural (29%) contexts. This was in contrast to past failures (3%) and the impact of COVID-19 (3%), which were less frequently expressed. Hesitation with respect to sociopolitical context involved the concern that sustainable food activities are inappropriate, given the sociopolitical context; the speculated negative impact on communities or stakeholders; causing inequity; beliefs that government should not be involved in plant-based eating due to individual autonomy with respect to food consumption; public and stakeholder (i.e., agricultural group) resistance; and ties with the meat industry. Example responses in this theme included “agricultural economic base and powerful lobbies,” “would be seen as regressive on low-income and food-insecure residents,” “food choices being viewed as individual choices and not the role of government to influence or control,” “perception that the push for plant-based foods is not equitable,” and “residents are anti-tax.”

Constraints related to structural context included restrictions of municipal control through policy; lack of authority; established priorities; and pushback from council, administration, or elected officials. Examples of structural barriers include “no taxing authority,” “isn’t the highest-prioritized sustainability issue locally, and elected-official support would be fairly low for implementing new policies or educational campaigns,” “do not have the purchasing power to make an impact,” and “there is no political appetite for the

policy.” These examples reflect subthemes, which are derived from the larger theme: taxing authority, purchasing power, priority, and administrative support.

Key Takeaways

1. It is critical to note that there is widespread hesitation on the part of sustainability offices to directly influence, particularly through policy, people’s food choices. This hesitation is present across the political spectrum. For more progressive municipalities, the concern is appearing indifferent to the issues of DEIJ connected to food. For more conservative municipalities, the concern is being labeled part of the “nanny state.” The root of such hesitations will need to be considered for any specific locale where advocates hope to pursue interventions, and a tailored, strategic response will need to be developed.
2. Most sustainability offices surveyed are very attuned to stakeholder concerns and interested in appeasing as many of them as possible. Advocates are likely to benefit from stakeholder mapping and a willingness to find points of consensus.
3. Many systemic differences are at play in the contexts in which sustainability offices operate. Preliminary research regarding the landscape to better understand pertinent constraints is needed before any particular intervention is proposed.

RQ4: Perceived Connections Between Environmental Justice and Plant-Based Food

In our qualitative analysis of the one open question we asked on this topic, we derived five main categories that respondents had identified as central to engaging environmental justice with their efforts to promote plant-based foods. Responses emphasized framing, listening, accessibility, incentives, and education. We found accessibility (31%) and framing (25%) to be the most common themes expressed in responses.

Accessibility included increasing food access, security, and choice. Examples of this are “food access and tackling food insecurity & food deserts” and “including culturally specific and significant food choices.” Within this theme, a number of responses mentioned

addressing the structural issues that perpetuate food deserts and limited food sovereignty rather than solely increasing access to food. One respondent suggested that “land use regulations that limit the density of establishments selling cheap, processed foods paired with increasing access in low- or moderate-income areas to fresh, healthy foods is likely to have a bigger impact than increasing food access alone.”

Framing involved developing messages around how to best talk about and connect their work to DEIJ. Within this theme, we found respondents emphasized framing sustainable food interventions around history, inclusion, and cultural relevance. Examples of this included “celebrating and recognizing plant-based traditional foods and dishes,” “uplifting BIPOC leaders and chefs,” and “new policies should be written in a way to explicitly address these shortcomings and both historic and modern oppression.”

Key Takeaways

1. There is some potential for connecting plant-based food choices to DEIJ. Respondents seemed most interested in pursuing this in terms of specific programs connected to increasing accessibility to plant-based foods and linking plant-based foods to traditional diets in messaging.

Broader Recommendations

1. Initiate dialogues with decision-makers in sustainability offices that expressed both an interest in plant-based food initiatives and a willingness to be contacted after the survey.
2. Consider partnering with the more progressive municipalities and demonstrating success in those locales before reaching out to more moderate and conservative ones.
3. Recognize that food is currently viewed as a lower-level priority for many of these offices and that more information and stronger arguments will be needed to advance the issue as a key area of importance.
4. Provide offices with ready-made resources, from ways of tracking food-related emissions to plant-based recipe guides, to address capacity issues and potentially increase the likelihood of some plant-based initiatives moving forward.
5. Help offices find ways to tie plant-based eating to local food economies that they are already comfortable supporting and promoting.
6. Tailor suggestions not only to the office but to the residents. It is important to understand that not one size fits all in working with various municipalities.

Appendix: Geographic Distribution of Survey Responses



Figure 1. A map of the United States indicating states where at least one survey respondent was located.