



LOCAL FOOD FOR LOCAL POWER

The Local Food for Local Power is a policy organizing project of the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (Southern SAWG). Southern SAWG has entered partnerships with four community based organizations to develop and implement food policy action plans. Each organization is paired with a mentor who provides on-going support and feedback on how to implement short term plans that can plant the seeds for improving access to quality food in their community. The organizations and their goals follow below:

- *CASTLES/Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS)- North Carolina*
 - Implementation of local and state wide initiatives to support farmers, youth leadership development, access to healthy food and food policy
- *Food Security Partners of Middle Tennessee*
 - Planning a faith-based initiative to address childhood obesity through grocery stores and food access in Nashville and the surrounding area
- *Virgin Islands Farmers Cooperative*
 - Developing a territory-wide initiative that engages diverse sectors toward heightening legislative awareness and action to improve food access
- *Youth For a Cleaner Environment (YFACE)- Georgia*
 - Partnering with local and regional organizations in food, farming and health through youth

HOW DOES THE PROJECT WORK?

Each organization is charged with developing its own Community Policy Action Plan that is part assessment, part strategic plan. Over a one year period, the community based organizations (CBOs) pursue their plans of action and participate in a learning community of peers at various levels of knowledge, awareness and capability in local food policy issues. Southern SAWG fosters a regional learning community through topically focused conference calls, small and large group training sessions and facilitated exchange among the community based organizations.

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HOW DOES THIS FIT INTO A LARGER REGIONAL CONVERSATION?

Local Power for Local Food (LFLP) is charged with imploring CBOs to deliberately engage their communities to establish and advance collectively held priorities in the food system. Also, LFLP was framed to systematically acquire an understanding of how communities prioritize food issues in the region through the use of a local food policy asset and needs assessment tool. The tool was framed to both spur internal dialog among respondents around the question ‘what is a food system?’ as well as to push them to consider who their allies and partners are; the requisite strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOTs); and their own capacity to address food systems policy issues.

Nearly 30 respondents ranked their local priorities across eight core domains related to the food system: personal and community wellness, hunger and poverty, food and agriculture systems, environment and environmental justice, food policy, community and economic development, asset based development and transportation and planning. Some of the key learnings that emerged include the following:

- CBOs are focused on immediate solutions to food insecurity issues such as strengthening farm infrastructure, community involvement and youth engagement moreso than changing food policies and regulations
- A commensurate focus on readily apparent systems components such as engagement with other CBOs versus transportation and governmental policy was also noted
- CBOs have limited relationships with the business community and government coupled with fear and distrust. However, curiosity about the possibilities of these relationships abounds given pre-existing models of success such as the United Way of Palm Beach County
- On a scale of 0-100, the average self-assigned ratings of the CBOs regarding their capacity to address food policy issues was 50.6
- CBOs desire more training and technical assistance in informing local food policy and wish to be wired into funding streams to support both action and advocacy agendas in local organizing

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WHAT DOES THIS SAY ABOUT NATIONAL FOOD POLICY ISSUES?

Although the findings can be generalized primarily to CBOs in the South, they do speak to trends across the country. There were a number of anticipated trends noted. The notion of ‘people power’ was a consistent theme as most respondents noted having more allies than formal partners. Also, individuals were the greatest resources to their work. There was a general apathy about the future of agriculture across land, food, water and production themes. Also, none of the respondents noted having affected change to the rules impacting local food policy. However, they indicated that there were actions in progress to support improved access and availability to wholesome foods.

Most critically, the data suggested that what we think might be important may not pan out among a diverse array of options within a discreet domain. For instance, sustainable and organic agriculture were lead priorities in the environment and environmental justice domain. Simultaneously, pesticides and soil erosion were at the bottom of the list behind issues such as food mileage and social justice. There were other unanticipated differences in priorities that suggest that the prevailing conventional logic around the food system may be askew especially as it relates to the South.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Our greatest indicators for food policy issues rest in the day-to-day circumstances of the lives of people in Anytown, America. How we systematically acquire an understanding of how people prioritize food issues makes a great difference in the results of what we wager in national policy organizing. Another key theme that emerged from the data was the lack of diversity locally and nationally in policy dialogs. Respondents noted that people of color and women were often left out of discussions about policy so the resultant changes in the local, state and national regulations are often bereft of the interests of those most likely to be impacted by rules that are limited in scope. Need alone will not sustain change.

We can strengthen our deliberations about food policy and close the gap between ‘us’ and ‘them’ through a paradigm that deliberately incorporates a diversity of perspectives including those from the grassroots. Local Food for Local Power is testing this notion by providing support to communities to address food, farming and health issues; sustaining a learning community of conventional and community leaders; and collecting data to gauge the grassroots perspectives on food systems policy.

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HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

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