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8-13-2020

### **New England food policy councils: An assessment of organizational structure, policy priorities and public participation**

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This is an article published by the University of California Press in *Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene* in 2020, available online: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1525/elementa.436>

This publication is an outcome from Cathryn A. Porter's MS thesis, which can be viewed here:

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#### **Recommended Citation**

Porter, C.A. and Ashcraft, C.M., 2020. New England food policy councils: An assessment of organizational structure, policy priorities and public participation. *Elem Sci Anth*, 8(1), p.39. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1525/elementa.436>

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**POLICY BRIDGE**

# New England food policy councils: An assessment of organizational structure, policy priorities and public participation

Cathryn A. Porter\* and Catherine M. Ashcraft†

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Food policy councils (FPCs) are an increasingly common mechanism to improve participation in food system decision-making. Including individuals from under-represented groups can foster greater understanding of their needs and experiences with food system barriers and is an important part of food justice. However, engaging under-represented groups in food systems decision-making remains challenging for FPCs. This paper presents the results from a survey of FPCs and networks in New England to: (1) identify FPC policy priorities, (2) characterize FPCs engaged in policy initiatives based on attributes which, based on the literature, may impact effective public participation: geographic scale, organization type, capacity, policy priorities, and membership, and (3) analyze methods for engaging the public in FPC policy initiatives and demographic groups and sectors engaged. Findings indicate only half of New England FPCs work on policy efforts. Many surveyed FPCs engage multiple food system sectors and under-represented groups through a combination of different public participation opportunities. However, results indicate that New England FPCs could benefit from a greater focus on engaging under-represented audiences. FPCs interested in engaging more diverse participants should commit to a focus on food justice, strive for representative membership through intentional recruitment, and offer multiple methods to engage the public throughout policy initiatives.

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**Keywords:** Food democracy; Food policy councils; Public participation; Deliberative democracy; Food justice

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## Introduction

Food insecurity is a persistent issue for many families and communities in New England. The average household food insecurity levels in New England from 2015–2017 ranged from 9.4% of the population in New Hampshire to 14.4% in Maine, meaning these households lacked enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2018). These statewide figures obscure the disproportionate impact of food system inequities on Black people, indigenous peoples, and other people of color, and low income individuals. Food system inequities include lack of access to healthy food and land, lack of livable wages and poor working conditions in food systems jobs (Marguerite Casey Foundation, 2016), and limited participation in decisions affecting the food system (Agyeman, 2013; Blackmar, 2014; Packer, 2014; Horst, 2017). A just food system engages people experiencing food system inequities to inform decisions

so that no groups are systemically excluded from healthy food systems (Hassanein, 2003; Ackerman-Leist, 2013; Purifoy, 2014). The food justice movement advocates for dismantling institutional racism and policies and programs that support inequalities in the food system (Horst, 2017).

Food policy councils (FPCs) are an increasingly common mechanism to improve participation in food system decision-making. According to the most recent survey conducted by the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF), there are over 300 FPCs in the U.S. and Canada (Bassarab et al., 2018). FPCs bring together diverse community members and stakeholders to discuss food system issues, implement programs, educate the community, advocate for policy change, work with local, state, and regional government agencies, and ultimately support the transition to more sustainable and just food systems (Harper et al., 2009; Sova McCabe, 2010; Low et al., 2015). An overwhelming majority (81%) of FPCs in the U.S. and Canada indicate that in order to meet their goals, they need relationships with community members and the general public (Bassarab et al., 2018).

In this paper, we define public participation as an interactive process to involve the public in problem solving or decision-making that results in better decisions

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(Creighton, 2005; International Association of Public Participation Federation, 2018). Consistent with Holley's definition of civic engagement, which is often used interchangeably with public participation, we recognize public participation can include a broad range of practices, principles and socioeconomic conditions by which food system stakeholders and community members contribute to decisions and problem solving and foster justice (Holley, 2016). Public participation can therefore foster food democracy by providing equitable access to all members of the food system to participate in shaping the food system (Hassanein, 2003).

However, similar to other civic engagement efforts, FPCs struggle to engage under-represented groups in food systems decision-making (Agyeman, 2013; Blackmar, 2014; Horst, 2017; Packer, 2014), which can lead to a lack of public trust in their ability to foster justice (Holley, 2016). For example, the membership of FPCs has been critiqued as being unrepresentative of their constituencies (Horst, 2017; Packer, 2014). Other research has highlighted FPCs' inadequate engagement of diverse individuals in public participation efforts to shape organizational goals (Agyeman, 2013; Blackmar, 2014; Packer, 2014), and the need to evaluate FPCs' work on food justice (Cadieux and Slocum, 2015).

Our research contributes findings from a survey of 12 New England FPCs to provide the first characterization of New England FPCs engaged in policy efforts and insights into how attributes of FPCs influence public participation opportunities. First, we review previous research on FPC characteristics and public participation. Then, we describe the landscape of New England FPCs, focusing on analyzing how FPCs engage the public and, specifically, under-represented groups in food systems policy efforts. Based on our analysis, we identify steps FPCs can take to improve public participation opportunities to foster justice.

### **Research on food policy councils and inclusive public participation**

In this section we describe and review prior research on FPC attributes that can impact inclusive public participation, including policy priorities, methods of public participation, membership, geographic scale, organization type, and capacity. An explicit focus on social justice or democracy can be critical for organizations to be effective at addressing food system inequities (Born and Purcell, 2006). Strengthening the capabilities of marginalized groups can be a primary motivating factor for people to work with an FPC (Gupta et al., 2018). The most common policy priorities of U.S. and Canadian FPCs are food access, economic development, and hunger (Bassarab et al., 2018). Local agriculture and food processing, institutional food service, food access, and food retail are additional initiatives commonly reported by FPCs (Calancie, Cooksey-Stowers, et al., 2018). However, generalizing across FPCs is difficult because FPCs engage in a broad range of activities, with some aiming to influence policy and others focusing entirely on programs (Gupta et al., 2018). Some examples of policy efforts FPCs take on are writing a food

charter, making recommendations for local zoning and land use policy to support agriculture, increasing access to local produce through supplemental nutrition assistance program (SNAP) incentives at farmers markets, or writing a school food policy that includes local food procurement (Harper et al., 2009).

FPCs that use a variety of public participation methods are more inclusive of a diverse public and individuals that can't make significant time commitments. Public participation can be characterized as "thick" or "thin" and both types have value. Thick public participation provides opportunity for discussion and deliberation, for example through study circles, focus groups, and interviews. Thin public participation activities, such as surveys, posters, and petitions, involve one way communication and allow participants to share their opinions, ideas or concerns in a quick and convenient manner (Nabatchi and Leighninger, 2015). Important considerations for engaging community members include where and when to hold meetings, how to work within existing community processes, whether to offer incentives to participants, strategically offering public education and planning events, and work on specific projects that encourage participation, such as a community food assessment (Agyeman, 2013).

Ideally, FPCs should offer a variety of opportunities for the public to share their ideas, interests, and input. U.S. and Canadian FPCs commonly report engaging in outreach activities to raise awareness, and not necessarily gather input, such as hosting educational events, supporting partner organizations through cross-promotion, distributing newsletters, and training community members. U.S. and Canadian FPCs also report offering thick engagement opportunities to engage the public to provide input for FPC policy activities, including hosting a community forum (Bassarab et al., 2018).

Diversity in FPC membership is important to bring together a broad group of stakeholders and community members to address food systems issues, yet remains a challenge for FPCs (Blackmar, 2014; Horst, 2017; Boden and Hoover, 2018). At least half of FPCs operating in the U.S. and Canada report that their membership includes individuals from the following groups: community, public health, anti-hunger/emergency food organizations, producers, colleges/universities, government staff, healthcare, labor, retail, social justice, and economic development (Bassarab et al., 2018). A second survey of these FPCs found that breadth of membership is an important determinant of FPC effectiveness (Calancie, Allen, et al., 2018).

Although many FPCs recognize the importance of having demographically diverse members, FPCs tend to focus on food sector representation (Agyeman, 2013). The membership of some FPCs has been critiqued for being dominated by white professionals and lacking diversity (Blackmar, 2014; Packer, 2014; Horst, 2017). People from affluent, educated communities often have greater access and opportunity to participate in the policy arena, while lower income communities face barriers, including lack of time and education, and cultural and language barriers

(Agyeman, 2013). Therefore, to avoid reinforcing existing patterns of inequality, active strategies are needed to achieve diverse FPC membership, such as recruiting and reserving membership seats for individuals from diverse groups or for professionals or organizations representing diverse groups (Agyeman, 2013).

FPCs are active at different geographic scales, but, relatively few studies have investigated the relationship between geographic scale and effective public participation (Fung, 2015). In the U.S. and Canada most FPCs operate at the county level (36%), the city/municipal level (20%), or at both a city/municipal and county level (15%). 1% of FPCs operate as a First Nations or Native American Council. Only 8% operate at a state or province/territory, and 15% at a regional level (Bassarab et al., 2018). Previous research shows that in some cases community members may be more interested in engaging in local level forums. Local forums can provide more opportunities for face-to-face interaction, be more accessible and understandable to under-represented individuals, and are perceived as resulting in tangible change (Allen, 2010; Anderson, 2008). However, local is not necessarily more just (Born and Purcell, 2006) and, in other cases, local level forums can exacerbate inequities (Anderson, 2008). It may be that collaboration across multiple geographic scales is most effective for empowering citizens to influence food system reform (Sova McCabe, 2010). For example, the Toronto Food Policy Council connected civic participation at the municipal and provincial levels, which led to policy change (Wekerle, 2004).

The organization type of an FPC can impact opportunities for engaging the public in decision-making (Agyeman, 2013; Packer, 2014), but, again, there is little information about how organization type relates to public participation. Organization type refers to how the FPC is structured, whether an FPC is embedded in government, is embedded in a university/college or part of an extension office, is a grassroots coalition, is a non-profit organization, or is housed within another non-profit organization (Palmer, 2016). In the U.S. and Canada, it is most common for FPCs to be housed in another non-profit (34%) followed by being embedded in government (26%), a grassroots coalition (20%), a non-profit (13%), and embedded in university or extension (5%) (Bassarab et al., 2018). Some FPCs embedded in government have a formal charter, which reserves membership seats for specific stakeholder groups or government roles. FPCs embedded in government typically have a close connection to government, whether the FPC is funded or staffed by government employees or is part of a department, such as planning, sustainability or economic development (Palmer, 2016). According to a survey of 10 California FPCs, participation by paid, local government staff as FPC members or support staff can provide legitimacy, insider connections, and much needed capacity to support FPC work, especially in communities where local organizations are stretched beyond their resources (Gupta et al., 2018).

However, without intentional efforts to engage under-represented groups, a close relationship with government can be a barrier to public participation by making the FPC

appear aligned with existing local interests or an agency mission and, therefore, less welcoming to those impacted by structural discrimination (Agyeman, 2013; Gupta et al., 2018). The meeting rules required of official government bodies, such as having set agendas, open meeting laws, and formalized decision rules, can discourage public participation (Holley, 2016; Gupta et al., 2018). Grassroots coalitions and non-profits, which are typically unaffiliated with government (Palmer, 2016) and have less formal rules (Gupta et al., 2018), may be more trusted by community participants. However, some grassroots and non-profit FPCs established with limited public participation face their own challenges attracting diverse public participation (Packer, 2014). FPCs embedded in a university can benefit from support provided by the university or Cooperative Extension, while FPCs housed within a non-profit often receive funding or staff support from the non-profit organization (Palmer, 2016).

As indicated above, adequate resources and staffing are important for the ability of FPCs to offer effective public participation opportunities (Agyeman, 2013; Blackmar, 2014) but funding for FPC activities is a common challenge (Bassarab et al., 2018). Capacity is defined by whether the FPC has access to dedicated funding and either part-time or full-time paid staff, instead of relying solely on volunteers. One third of FPCs in the U.S. and Canada reported a \$0 annual budget, while 35% of FPCs reported a budget of \$1–10,000 (Bassarab et al., 2018).

## Methods

This analysis is based on data from a survey of FPCs engaged in policy efforts in New England conducted during October–December 2017, supplemented with contemporary (2016) data from an annual survey conducted by CLF all FPCs in the U.S. and Canada (Porter and Ashcraft, 2020a). We chose to focus on the region as an important scale for applied food systems research and work. New England is a well-defined region, with shared food systems opportunities and challenges, and many coordinating food systems efforts (Donahue et al., 2014; Low et al., 2015).

We identified 15 FPCs in New England that were actively engaged in policy efforts and recruited one representative from each to respond to a mix of open and closed-ended survey questions about policy priorities, recent policy and planning processes, and how public participation was incorporated into these processes. The survey was conducted online through Qualtrics. Representatives from 12 of the 15 FPCs responded to the survey. For further information about the survey methodology and response rate see (Porter and Ashcraft, 2020b). In the following analysis, we present selected findings from the 12 surveyed New England FPCs engaged in policy efforts. The complete survey results are also available (Porter and Ashcraft, 2020b).

## Results

In this section, we first provide descriptive findings about the surveyed FPCs and then analyze FPC attributes (geographic scale, organization type, capacity, policy priorities,

membership) and public participation. While public participation can take many forms, this research aims to understand the relationship between FPC attributes and public participation opportunities offered by FPCs. We therefore consider FPC membership to be an FPC attribute that can affect who is included in public participation opportunities, which is consistent with other research into FPC effectiveness (e.g. (Calancie, Allen, et al., 2018)). Our results show great variety among some of the attributes of the 12 surveyed New England FPCs engaged in policy efforts, including geographic scale and organization type (**Table 1**).

### **Engagement in policy efforts**

15 out of 26 active FPCs and networks in New England were found to be engaged in policy efforts. These results may actually overestimate the percentage of New England FPCs engaged in policy as we designed the survey so respondents could define for themselves what constitutes a policy effort. Results therefore include initiatives that engage the community but do not necessarily have a specific policy objective, such as a food system summit. In comparison to FPCs in the U.S. and Canada, New England FPCs and networks are less likely to be engaged in policy efforts (Bassarab et al., 2018).

### **Geographic scale**

At the time of the survey, among New England FPCs engaged in policy efforts, only Rhode Island and Massachusetts had FPCs operating at the state level. The landscape of New England FPCs changes quickly and, by the time of writing, New Hampshire had one new municipal FPC, the Greater Nashua Food Council, and a statewide alliance, the New Hampshire Food Alliance, now working on food policy efforts. In comparison to FPCs in the U.S. and Canada, the surveyed FPCs are less likely to operate at a county level and more likely to operate at the municipal level (Bassarab et al., 2018). Only three surveyed FPCs operate at the county level; all are located in Maine. Seven FPCs engaged in policy efforts operate at the municipal level, including all three of Connecticut's councils. Some states, like Maine and Massachusetts, have multiple FPCs working on policy at different geographic scales.

### **Organization type**

The surveyed New England FPCs engaged in policy are more likely to be embedded in government as compared to trends for U.S. and Canadian FPCs (Bassarab et al., 2018). The five FPCs embedded in government, include all three of Connecticut's and none of Maine's five FPCs. Three are

**Table 1:** Attributes of 12 surveyed New England FPCs engaged in policy. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/elementa.436.t1>

<b>Name of food policy council</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Geographic scale</b>	<b>Organization type</b>	<b>Staff capacity</b>	<b>Budget</b>
Bridgeport Food Policy Council	CT	Municipal	Embedded in government	Part-time paid staff member	\$0–10,000
Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy	CT	Municipal	Embedded in government	Part-time paid staff member	\$10,000–25,000
New Haven Food Policy Council	CT	Municipal	Embedded in government	Part-time paid staff member	No data
Cambridge Food & Fitness Food Policy Council	MA	Municipal	Embedded in government	No data	No data
Massachusetts Food Policy Council	MA	State	Embedded in government	Part-time paid staff member	\$0–10,000
Worcester Food Policy Council	MA	Municipal	Non-profit	Full-time paid staff member	\$25,000–100,000
Community Food Matters	ME	County	Grassroots coalition	More than one paid staff member	\$0–10,000
Cumberland County Food Security Council	ME	County	Housed in another non-profit	More than one paid staff member	No data
Good Food Council of Lewiston-Auburn	ME	Municipal	Grassroots coalition	Part-time paid staff member	\$0–10,000
Healthy Waterville	ME	Municipal	Grassroots coalition	Full-time paid staff member	\$25,000–100,000
Washington County Community Food Council	ME	County	Housed in another non-profit	No data	\$0–10,000
Rhode Island Food Policy Council	RI	State	Housed in another non-profit	More than one paid staff member	No data

Data source for analysis: Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future Food Policy Network 2016 survey data (Sussman and Bassarab, 2016).

embedded in another non-profit organization and one FPC, in Worcester, Massachusetts, is its own non-profit organization. Three FPCs engaged in policy are grassroots coalitions, all located in Maine.

### Capacity

Of the eight surveyed New England FPCs that contributed budget data to the 2016 CLF report, five reported a budget between \$0 and \$10,000, one a budget between \$10,000 and \$25,000, and two a budget between \$25,000 and \$100,000. Most, 10 out of 12, surveyed FPCs have at least one paid part-time or full-time staff member (Sussman and Bassarab, 2016).

### Policy priorities and policy efforts

The survey asked respondents to identify the policy priorities of their FPC, the overarching policy objectives on which they focus. Similar to FPCs in the U.S. and Canada, the most frequently identified FPC policy priority is food access (Bassarab et al., 2018). Over half of respondents report prioritizing public health, food waste/recovery, land use/planning, economic development, food procurement, and food justice/equity.<sup>1</sup> The surveyed FPCs that identified food justice as a policy priority (7) were most often embedded in government. All five of the FPCs embedded in government reported food justice as a policy priority and none of the grassroots coalitions did.

The survey asked each FPC representative to identify up to three of their FPC's policy efforts, defined as specific policy processes on which the FPC had worked. Respondents identified specific policy efforts that span a range of topics, from the general food system to more focused topics around school food and protecting food

workers, for example (Table 2). Five of the FPCs reported working on planning efforts and three reported working on assessments.

### FPC membership

#### Representation in FPC membership

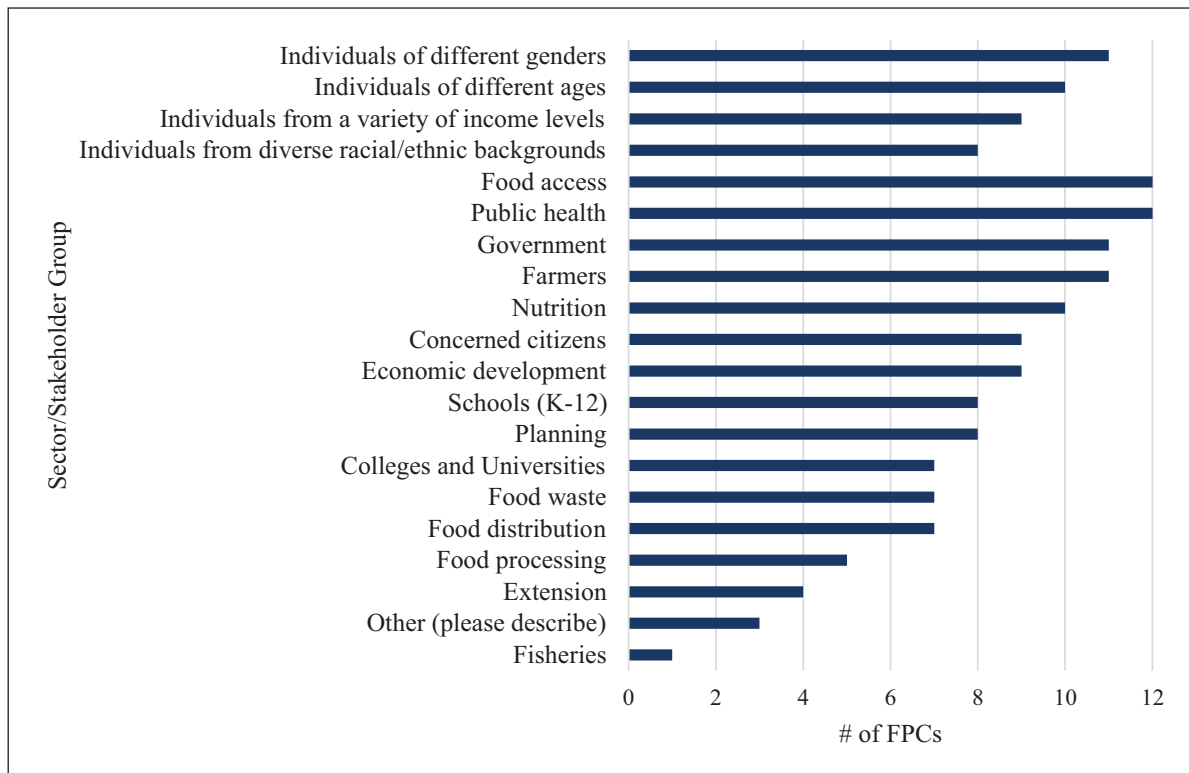
The membership of most surveyed FPCs includes individuals representing many different sectors and demographic groups (Figure 1). The surveyed FPCs report similar trends in membership as U.S. and Canadian FPCs (Bassarab et al., 2018). Sectors that are well represented in membership are public health, food access, government, farmers/producers, economic development, nutrition, and concerned citizens. Sectors that are relatively less well represented in FPC membership are the food processing, food distribution, food waste sectors, colleges and universities, and Extension. Only one surveyed FPC reported including a council member representing the fisheries sector. Respondents added several sectors to the list of provided options, included in Figure 1 under "Other", researchers, legal aid, social justice, funder, small business, cooperatives, and emergency food providers.

Most surveyed FPCs report their council membership includes members representing diverse genders, ages, income levels, and, to a lesser extent (but still over half of surveyed FPCs), diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Eight FPCs don't include members from all demographic groups: four report not including members from diverse races and ethnicities, one reports not including members of diverse ages, two report not including members from diverse income levels, and two report not including members from diverse genders.

**Table 2:** Policy efforts reported by surveyed New England FPCs. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/elementa.436.t2>

Policy Effort Topic	# of FPCs engaged in policy effort	Example of specific policy efforts
Food System	6	local food action plan; community food charter; strategic action plan, state food strategy; food system summit; food policy forum; community food assessment
School Food	6	K-12 school food procurement; cultural considerations in school food, increase summer meals provision and utilization; breakfast after the bell legislation; school food security assessment; school wellness policy
Urban Agriculture	4	urban agriculture zoning ordinance; favorable zoning changes for agriculture, poultry and bees; urban agriculture master plan
Food Access	3	streamlining the emergency food system; mitigating hunger/food insecurity through advocating for program implementation
SNAP	3	SNAP matching collaboration; SNAP Ed and double dollars at local markets; SNAP incentives at farmers markets
Food System Businesses	1	permitting & licensing of new food businesses; protecting food workers
Processing & Distribution	1	distribution infrastructure; processing infrastructure
Climate Change	1	city's climate action plan; food system summit
Food Waste	1	wasted food policy change
Equity	1	equity based policy change

This table presents the policy efforts reported by survey respondents, organized by topic.



**Figure 1: Membership of surveyed New England FPCs by sector and demographic group.** Survey respondents identified the sectors and demographic groups currently represented in the council membership for surveyed New England FPCs engaged in policy. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/elementa.436.f1>

**Reserving FPC membership seats**

Five surveyed FPCs report they reserve membership seats for individuals from diverse sectors. All five of these FPCs are embedded in government. A likely explanation is that the FPCs embedded in government have a formal charter or ordinance requiring the FPC to reserve seats. Surveyed New England FPCs report reserving seats for a number of sectors/groups, including: city officials, nutrition, food distribution, food access, agriculture, public health, education, environment, economic development, farmers, production, marketing, and processing (Porter and Ashcraft, 2020b). Significantly, while four FPCs reserve seats for the public, no surveyed FPCs report reserving seats for groups representing diverse ages, genders, income levels or races and ethnicities.

**Recruiting FPC members**

The survey also asked respondents whether their FPC recruits members from diverse income levels, genders, ages, or races and ethnicities. More than half of surveyed FPCs report they recruit members from at least one under-represented group. Four FPCs recruit members of diverse age groups and diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and two FPCs report recruiting members representing diverse incomes. No surveyed FPCs report recruiting members of diverse genders. Other groups from which FPCs reported recruiting members are food insecure individuals and newcomers to the state.

As one respondent reported, determining which demographic groups to recruit can be a challenge.

To be honest, we don't have enough conversations about race, inclusion, and demographic representation, so I can't point to a specific instance of demographic groups being identified (without thinking about scenarios where [white-dominant-approach-to-diversity] things like tokenism occurred) (Survey Response FPC 8 2017).

The challenge of identifying demographic groups and subsequently recruiting members may explain why no surveyed FPCs report reserving seats for different demographic groups. The scope and success of recruitment efforts is also unknown. For example, four FPCs reported recruiting members through personal outreach or invitations to existing contacts. The success of such strategies will likely depend on the diversity of existing members' networks.

**FPC public participation**

**Methods of public participation**

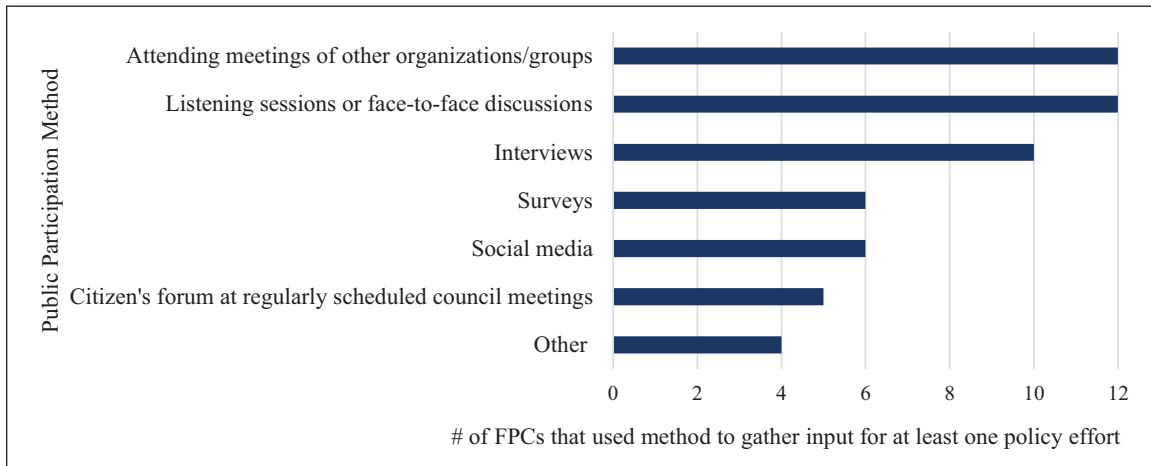
The public participation methods FPCs used to gather input during each of the policy efforts respondents identified are presented in **Figure 2** according to the number of FPCs reporting they used a specific method in at least one policy effort. All surveyed FPCs report gathering public input for at least one policy effort and report using multiple public participation methods. Impressively, 11 surveyed New England FPCs reported using at least three different public participation methods for each policy effort in which they engaged the public. The most frequently used public participation methods reported are

attending meetings of other organizations or groups, listening sessions or face-to-face discussions, and conducting interviews. All three methods are considered thick engagement and provide opportunity for discussion and deliberation, as compared to one-way thin engagement methods. The overwhelming majority of surveyed FPCs (10) report gathering input for all identified efforts; the two that did not are grassroots coalitions. All surveyed FPCs with a focus on food justice (7) reported gathering input for all identified policy efforts. In contrast to the image of robust public participation opportunities, one respondent reported that

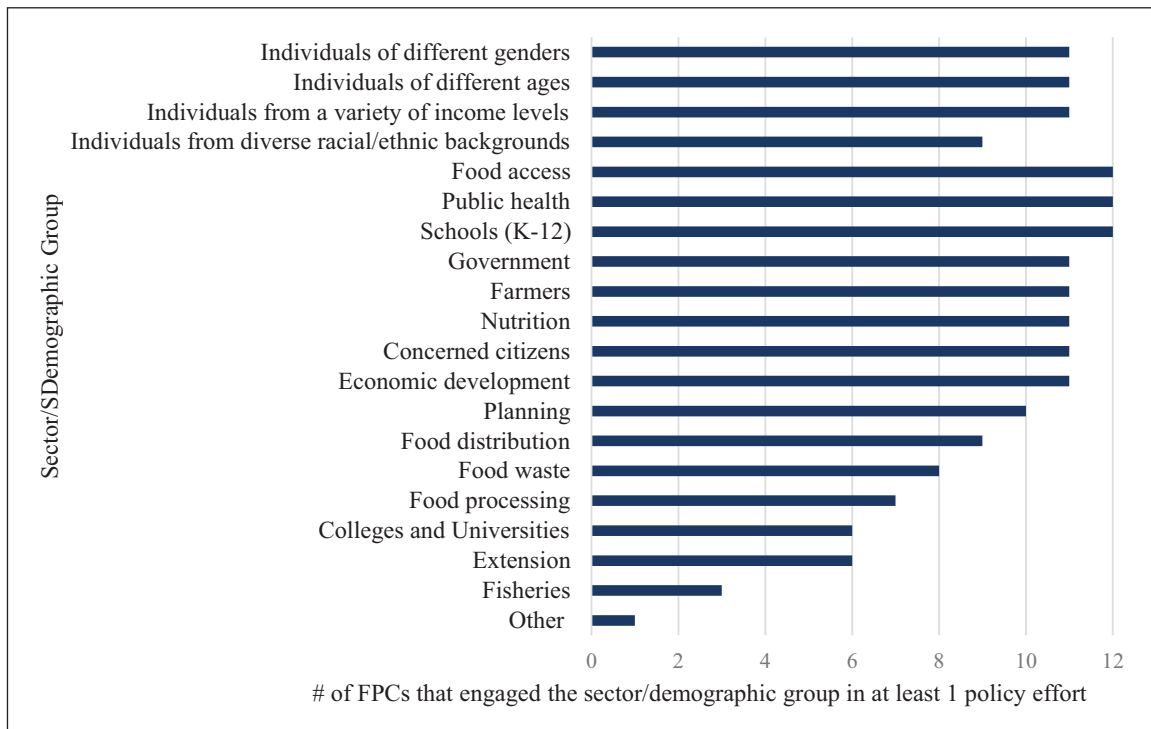
a city government-led effort deliberately didn't offer public participation opportunities, which highlights the need for continued planning to ensure public participation.

Sectors and demographic groups engaged by FPCs in public participation opportunities

**Figure 3** presents the number of FPCs reporting they engaged a specific sector or demographic group in at least one of their policy efforts. 11 of the 12 surveyed New England FPCs report engaging individuals of different genders, varying ages, or a variety of income levels. Individu-



**Figure 2: Public participation methods used by surveyed New England FPCs.** Respondents identified the public participation methods used by surveyed New England FPCs in policy efforts. Methods are listed in order from thick engagement (top), which involve more deliberation and group discussion, to thin engagement opportunities (bottom), which tend to be one-way communication methods. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/elementa.436.f2>



**Figure 3: Sectors and demographic groups engaged by surveyed New England FPCs in public participation opportunities.** New England FPC survey respondents identified the sectors and demographic groups they engage in public participation opportunities for their policy efforts. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/elementa.436.f3>



als from diverse races and ethnicities are the demographic group least likely to be engaged in public participation opportunities, but were still engaged by nine FPCs. The majority of surveyed FPCs (11) reported engaging with at least half of the 15 food systems sectors listed in the survey. All surveyed FPCs report engaging representatives from the food access, schools (K-12), and public health sectors in at least one policy effort. Fewer surveyed FPCs engage representatives from Extension, colleges and universities, and fisheries. One respondent indicated they would have liked to engage more with the fisheries sector if they had more time, but that fisheries don't always feel included within the scope of FPC work. In addition to the provided list, respondents added other sectors they engage: businesses, networks, land trusts, and United Way.

We considered possible explanations for observed patterns in FPC engagement of different sectors and demographic groups in public participation opportunities, based on FPC attributes. Of the three surveyed FPCs that engage all 15 listed food systems sectors, two operate at the state level and both reported working on state level food systems plans, for which it makes sense that the FPCs would strive to engage representatives from diverse food systems sectors. While geographic scale could play a role in comprehensive sectoral representation, the type of policy initiative may be an important factor influencing the range of sectors engaged in public participation opportunities.

The sectors and demographic groups engaged in public participation opportunities are generally similar to the sectors and demographic groups reported as being included in the surveyed FPC membership (**Figure 1**). A possible explanation could be that FPC membership influences who FPCs engage in public participation opportunities. Of the eight FPCs engaging people from all listed demographics in public participation opportunities, five report having members from all listed demographic groups. However, the connection between membership and engagement of diverse groups is not clear. Among FPCs that report including only some demographic groups in their membership, some demographic groups represented in the FPC membership are not engaged in public participation opportunities and some demographic groups not represented in the FPC membership are engaged in public participation opportunities.

One respondent commented,

I think in general the system actors who have the capacity to advocate and work programmatically around policy issues and goals are “at the table” in the sense that organizations and other stakeholders who operate in a top-down fashion have representation on the Council. There is also grassroots representation in many instances, which offers a sense of satisfaction in representativeness. However, the culture of representation by organization creates a dynamic where people speak on behalf of others (e.g. a food bank operator speaking on behalf of a “patron” or “client” of that food bank) in a way that potentially only pays lip service to the

idea that the voices of those who experience food insecurity are being represented. (Survey Response FPC 8 2017)

According to this respondent, one reason it is difficult to engage those who experience food insecurity is that volunteers do most FPC work. They continued, “Public input is at the cornerstone of our policymaking process. Worth greater scrutiny is what is considered “public” input and who is bottlenecked out of the input-gathering process” (Survey Response FPC 8 2017). Barriers to direct engagement of food insecure individuals, such as scheduling working group meetings during the day, means that FPC activities typically engage representatives of professional organizations that provide services, instead of directly engaging food insecure individuals themselves. By not addressing the participation barriers to direct engagement, FPCs risk reinforcing systemic inequality.

The practice of reserving membership seats for diverse demographic groups cannot explain the similarity between who is included in FPC membership and who is engaged in public participation opportunities because no FPCs report reserving seats for diverse demographic groups. However, reserving seats could influence engagement of diverse sectors. Interestingly, half (four) of the FPCs engaging people from all listed demographics do report *recruiting* members from diverse demographic groups. But one respondent described their FPC's recruitment efforts as not being very active and another respondent from an FPC embedded in government reported their FPC's informal recruitment efforts are constrained by the requirement to fill membership seats with specific government positions. Despite these limitations, it may be that FPCs recruit participants for public participation opportunities informally through their members' existing networks, just as four FPCs reported doing for recruiting members.

In addition to FPC membership, another possible explanation is that organization type contributes to engagement of diverse demographic groups. The eight FPCs that reported engaging people from all diverse demographics include all five of the FPCs embedded in government, two of the three FPCs housed in a non-profit, and one of the three grassroots organizations. This analysis suggests that, among surveyed FPCs, FPCs embedded in government are most likely to engage people from all demographics and FPCs that are grassroots organizations are least likely to do so. Again, this finding is not readily explained by the practice of reserving seats for membership. Although the five FPCs embedded in government reserve seats for members from diverse sectors, no surveyed FPCs report reserving seats for diverse demographic groups.

Of the eight FPCs engaging people from all listed demographics in public participation opportunities, seven have a focus on food justice. Recruiting diverse demographic groups for FPC membership and engaging diverse demographic groups in public participation opportunities could both reflect an FPC's overall commitment to inclusion and justice. Surprisingly, the seven FPCs that engage people from all listed demographics and have a focus on food justice include all five FPCs embedded in government and

no grassroots coalitions. A possible explanation is that, unlike other organization types, FPCs embedded in government have a mandate to represent the public interest, which may contribute to more inclusive efforts to engage diverse demographic groups.

**Satisfaction with public participation opportunities**

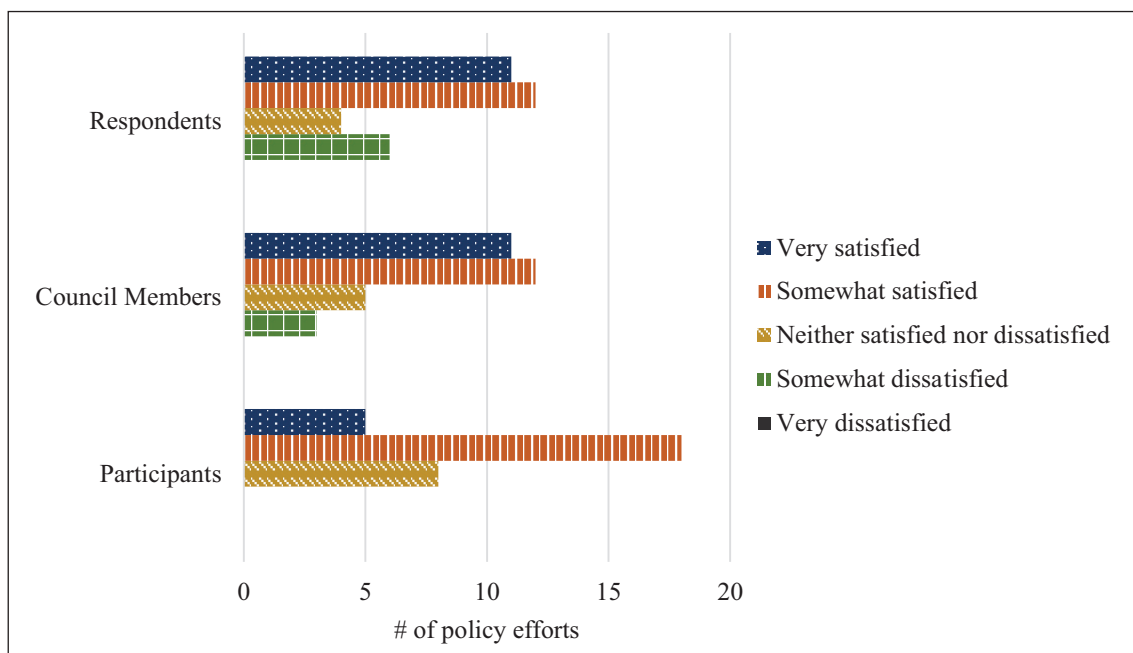
The survey asked respondents about overall satisfaction with the public participation opportunities for each policy effort they identified. Respondents reported their own level of satisfaction, their perception of the FPC’s satisfaction, and their perception of the participants’ satisfaction (Figure 4). While a respondent’s perception of the satisfaction of others is subjective and can be based on varying considerations, these questions were intended to provide additional insight into the perceived adequacy of participation opportunities. For example, one respondent explained that they considered a public participation opportunity to be successful due to their FPC’s collaboration with other organizations in co-hosting the effort.

Overall, most respondents reported being at least somewhat satisfied with most public participation opportunities. Respondents reported being somewhat or very satisfied with 23 out of 33 public participation opportunities, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with four opportunities, and somewhat dissatisfied with six opportunities. Several survey respondents indicated they perceive a need to improve the quality of public participation opportunities. One respondent explained, “We talk about the lack of robust participation regularly in our meetings – we are well aware that council members and the subgroups that are leading these policy efforts need to do better in this area and are actively strategizing to do so” (Survey Response FPC 2 2017).

For 16 of the 23 public participation opportunities where respondents reported being somewhat or very satisfied, respondents also reported that public participation opportunities shaped the decision or outcome made by the FPC. If input shaped the decision, respondents were more likely to perceive public participation positively. In other cases, the public participation opportunities could have been improved. For example, one respondent noted participants would have liked to be engaged earlier in the process, highlighting the need for public participation opportunities to be included throughout all stages of a policy process in order to ensure that input can inform decisions.

Of the eleven instances where survey respondents reported being very satisfied, six were public participation opportunities associated with developing a plan or assessment. One of the efforts for which respondents stated being somewhat dissatisfied was an equity based policy change effort. The respondent said that while their effort had some successes, policy work focused on fostering equity is difficult. Echoing a consideration identified above about comprehensive representation of diverse sectors, it may be that it’s easier to engage diverse participants effectively in some types of policy efforts, such as specific plans and assessments, and more challenging for other types of policy efforts, such as broader equity focused efforts.

For a number of policy efforts, respondents reported differences between their own level of satisfaction with public participation opportunities and what they perceived to be the level of satisfaction of either the FPC or of the participants (Porter and Ashcraft, 2020b). One survey respondent explained why their own satisfaction with public participation opportunities was lower than



**Figure 4: Survey respondents’ satisfaction and perceived satisfaction of FPC members and participants with public participation opportunities.** Survey respondents identified their satisfaction, their perception of the satisfaction of FPC members, and their perception of the participant’s satisfaction with public participation opportunities of New England FPCs’ policy efforts. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/elementa.436.f4>

what they perceived participants' satisfaction to be, "Those that were able to participate I think they were excited to see this progress happening but also acknowledged that there is more we can do" (Survey Response FPC 2 2017). This respondent also reported the FPC had not previously engaged the public in policy efforts. Their response can therefore be understood as participants being "somewhat satisfied" with engagement, as compared to a low baseline, the lack of previous "channels for community engagement." The respondent reported being "somewhat dissatisfied" because they see how much "more work" the FPC has to do (Survey Response FPC 2 2017). Additional survey respondents also identified the low baseline for community engagement and that their FPC was just at the beginning of a process that takes time to engage more people and see successful policy change.

## Discussion

We find that only about half of New England food policy councils and networks are engaged in policy efforts, as compared to about three quarters of FPCs across the U.S. Plans and assessments dominate recent policy efforts by surveyed FPCs, such as food action plans, community food assessments, chapters in master plans and climate action plans, and survey respondents report high levels of satisfaction with public participation opportunities associated with plans and assessments.

Most surveyed FPCs report offering robust public participation opportunities, which combine multiple methods to engage the public through both deliberation and one-way dialogue and engage individuals from diverse sectors and demographic groups in public participation opportunities. Importantly, survey respondents acknowledge that New England FPCs have more work to do to better engage diverse demographic groups, in particular, from diverse races and ethnicities. And, participation can occur through representation by proxy organizations, where people speak on behalf of others. This kind of indirect participation misses an important opportunity for FPCs to engage directly with under-represented audiences to address food system inequities.

We find that the surveyed FPCs with a focus on food justice and FPCs embedded in government are more likely to engage individuals from all diverse demographic groups. In contrast to a study of FPCs in California that finds grassroots FPCs to be inclusive and accessible to the public (Gupta et al., 2018), we find that surveyed grassroots FPCs in New England are less likely to engage individuals from all diverse demographic groups. Surveyed FPCs embedded in government also reserve membership seats for diverse sectors, likely due to formal requirements to do so. Although no surveyed New England FPCs report reserving seats for groups representing different ages, gender, income levels or races and ethnicities, most report having individuals from these groups among their members and half report they recruit members from at least one under-represented group. The possibility of a connection between membership and public engagement is supported by a study finding a relationship between some membership sectors and an FPC's policy priority; for example, an FPC that has farmers as members is more

likely to work on food production policies (Bassarab et al., 2019).

Instead of being seen as independent factors, an FPC's focus on food justice may manifest through connected FPC characteristics and practices, including membership, a commitment to gathering input in policy efforts, recruiting of members from diverse demographic groups, and engaging diverse demographic groups in public participation opportunities. Future FPC surveys, such as the annual CLF survey, could consider including questions asking about representation of diverse demographic groups in membership. Further research could also investigate in more depth the relationships between an FPC's organizational structure embedded in government, a focus on food justice, and diversity in FPC public participation.

FPCs interested in fostering greater diversity in public participation efforts should commit to a focus on food justice and to translating this into practice by purposefully recruiting members beyond their own networks to diversify FPC membership. The primary membership recruitment strategy surveyed FPCs use is personal outreach to existing contacts, which limits recruitment efforts to existing networks. Similarly, a study of FPCs in the mid-Atlantic found that FPCs relied on their own networks to recruit members and lacked a strategy to expand recruitment of members of under-represented groups (Boden and Hoover, 2018). To diversify their membership, New England FPCs should therefore consider broader recruitment strategies and reserving seats for diverse demographic groups, in addition to sectors, while paying careful attention to avoid tokenism. For example, FPCs operating at the city or municipal scale could consider recruiting members from particular neighborhoods and using quotas to guide membership composition, similar to how districts are represented on a city council (Boden and Hoover, 2018). FPCs interested in fostering greater inclusion and justice should also engage people in public participation activities through targeted outreach and by offering multiple ways for people to engage early and often throughout the policy process.

## Study limitations

Although the responses reflect most of the FPCs engaged in policy in New England (12 out of 15), the data set is small and contains relatively small variation across FPCs in the diversity of membership, in the number and types of public participation opportunities offered, and in the diversity of sectors and demographic groups engaged in public participation opportunities. Due to the small data set and limited variation within it, we cannot reject the possibility that observed differences are explainable by chance alone. While this study contributes to emerging interest in FPC attributes and public participation in policy efforts by presenting findings at a regional scale, we do not know how generalizable our findings are to FPCs beyond New England or to FPCs not engaged in policy. Survey responses reflect the perspectives of only one representative from each surveyed FPC. Future research is needed to understand FPC public participation from different perspectives and in more depth to provide a more comprehensive understanding of what public par-

ticipation means in practice, the effectiveness of FPCs' public participation opportunities, and, ultimately, how to expand the political voice of those experiencing food system inequities.

### Conclusion

FPCs are a mechanism to practice food democracy and include diverse representation in food systems decision-making. The goal of this research was to understand New England FPCs: their policy priorities and efforts, their public participation opportunities, and how their attributes may influence public participation activities. We find a robust landscape of public participation opportunities to inform food systems policy in New England, with the majority of surveyed FPCs offering multiple public participation activities and engaging with diverse sectors and demographic groups. However, survey responses confirm there is additional work needed to better engage underrepresented groups, in particular. FPCs can benefit from a more intentional focus on food justice and on who they are recruiting and engaging to inform food systems decision making. We hope the findings and recommendations identified in this research will inform FPCs' efforts to foster more just public participation and inform future areas of research.

### Data Accessibility Statement

The New England food policy council survey results and survey instrument are available. Individual responses are not made publicly available to protect participant confidentiality, in compliance with the University of New Hampshire's Institutional Review Board approval IRB# 6761.

- Porter CA, Ashcraft CM. 2020. New England Food Policy Council Survey Instrument. *Natural Resources and the Environment Scholarship*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34051/c/2020.4>
- Porter CA, Ashcraft CM. 2020. New England Food Policy Council Survey Results. *Natural Resources and the Environment Scholarship*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34051/d/2020.6>

Other data described in the article are from the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future Food Policy Council Annual Survey 2016 Responses, were made available through request to the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, and were not produced by the authors.

### Note

- <sup>1</sup> The survey did not pre-define the categories of priorities to enable respondents to select or add categories according to their own definitions. It is likely that respondents vary in their interpretations of what fits within the scope of each category.

### Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Mary Adamo Friedman and Dr. Miriam Nelson for feedback and guidance. Thank you to the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future for sharing data from the Food Policy Council Report 2016. Thank you to Molly

Shanahan for assistance with formatting the figures. Thank you to the editor and two reviewers for their comments and feedback that improved the article. Most of all, thank you to the New England FPC survey respondents who contributed their time, energy, and insights.

### Competing interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

### Author contributions

- Contributed to conception and design: CAP, CMA
- Contributed to acquisition of data: CAP
- Contributed to analysis and interpretation of data: CAP, CMA
- Drafted and/or revised the article: CAP, CMA
- Approved the submitted version for publication: CAP, CMA

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**How to cite this article:** Porter, CA and Ashcraft, CM. 2020. New England food policy councils: An assessment of organizational structure, policy priorities and public participation. *Elem Sci Anth*, 8: 39. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/elementa.436>

**Domain Editor-in-Chief:** Alastair Iles, Environmental Science, Policy and Management, University of California Berkeley, US

**Knowledge Domain:** Sustainability Transitions

**Part of an *Elementa* Forum:** New Pathways to Sustainability in Agroecological Systems

**Submitted:** 02 March 2020    **Accepted:** 12 July 2020    **Published:** 13 August 2020

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