



Commentary

Strengthening democratic governance in times of crisis: Lessons from the Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council

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Abstract

Democracy, including processes that govern food systems, are under threat of erosion. Contextualizing and articulating governance challenges is an essential first step. However, it is valuable to look to practices that provide more meaningful ways of engaging non-state actors in government processes. In this commentary, we look at the establishment and activities of the Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council (the Council) which has been “learning-by-doing” participatory governance. The

Council offers insights into both the strengths and challenges that face participatory governance as well as highlights ways these processes can be strengthened. In such a critical time, it is important to strengthen mechanisms of engagement that both bolster meaningful engagement and accountability between the government and rights holders.

Keywords: Civil society; food system governance; participatory governance

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Résumé

La démocratie, incluant les processus qui régissent les systèmes alimentaires, est menacée d'érosion.

Contextualiser et articuler les défis de la gouvernance est une première étape essentielle. Toutefois, il est utile de se pencher sur les pratiques qui offrent des moyens plus significatifs d'impliquer les acteurs non étatiques dans les processus gouvernementaux. Dans ce commentaire, nous examinons la création et les activités du Conseil consultatif de la politique alimentaire du

Canada qui a « appris par la pratique » la gouvernance participative. Le conseil offre un aperçu des forces de la gouvernance participative et des défis auxquels elle est confrontée, et met en lumière les moyens de renforcer ces processus. Dans une période aussi critique, il est important de renforcer les mécanismes d'engagement qui favorisent à la fois un engagement significatif et la responsabilité entre le gouvernement et les détenteurs de droits.

Introduction

As we write this commentary in early 2025, democratic institutions across the globe are under increasing threat of erosion, from both authoritarian rule and corporate capture. While these realities have been growing over the past several decades, at this moment, there is a convergence of both phenomena happening at the same time and across scales. This was evident in the shift of global food governance at the United Nations during the 2021 Food Systems Summit that gave preference to corporate actors and eroded trust among civil society movements (Anderl & Hißen, 2024; Canfield et al., 2021) as well as the dismantling of democratic institutions and accountability watchdogs across the United States (Binkley & Megerian, 2025; Honderich, 2025). While these strategies to consolidate power are not new, this moment of convergence presents a real and present threat to current ways of life and collective well-being. In particular, these shifts undermine accountability measures between states and rights holders.

Contextualizing and articulating these challenges are an essential first step towards identifying alternative arrangements. However, it is possibly even more valuable to establish and enhance practices that provide meaningful ways of engaging non-state actors in government processes, especially those most impacted and often marginalized by decisions. This includes opportunities for participatory governance, that is, relational approaches, grounded in principles of deliberative democracy and collaboration that involve diverse voices and perspectives in decision making processes. Our research on civil society and social movement engagement in food systems governance across Canada and Indigenous territories has explored opportunities and cautions related to these efforts (for example, Levkoe et al., 2023, 2025; Littlefield et al., 2024; Guinto et al., 2024; Wilson & Tasala, 2024). In this commentary, we look at the establishment and activities of the Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council¹ which has been “learning-by-doing” participatory governance.²

¹ Hereafter referred to as “the Council.”

² For a review of our research findings see Wilkes et al., 2025.

Identifying approaches to food systems governance that involve a broader range of engagement can help to develop solutions to persistent and emerging issues. Drawing on diverse experiences and perspectives within food systems can contribute to more informed decision-making. Likewise, participatory mechanisms for governance can ensure greater accountability to the public (and specifically for food producers, harvesters, workers across the food chain, and Indigenous people). Food policy groups are key examples of participatory food governance efforts, established with the explicit goal of engaging a wide range of sectors and people in decision making across food systems (Schiff et al., 2022; Bassarab et al., 2019). With the growth in food policy groups,³ in tandem with food systems scholarship and civil society advocacy, more integrated approaches to food policy have received greater attention.

Building on efforts like the People's Food Commission (1980) and the People's Food Policy (Food Secure Canada [FSC], 2011), the Food Policy for Canada was established by the federal government in 2019. It was informed by the work of researchers, civil society, and industry advocacy from across Canada and Indigenous territories (ad hoc Working Group on Food Policy Governance, 2017). As participatory governance that involves active civil society engagement gained traction (Martorell & Andrée, 2018), consultation on the Food Policy for Canada built expectations around the possibilities of more inclusive food systems governance processes (Levkoe & Wilson, 2019). In 2021, the federal government announced the Council tasked with supporting and helping to guide the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) on issues relevant to the Food Policy, including its direction and implementation. Functioning as a national food policy group, the

Council was launched “as a framework to align and coordinate federal food-related initiatives and address critical challenges facing Canada's food systems to improve social, health, environmental and economic outcomes” (Government of Canada, 2025, para 1). Members were selected to represent a wide range of regions, communities, industries, and interests.

The Council's establishment was a significant step towards more participatory food systems governance in Canada. Our research findings showed it has provided a space for civil society actors to engage with the government and offers key recommendations on issues such as food waste, agricultural sustainability, food insecurity, and the design of a national school food program. The Council fostered relationships with AAFC staff and enabled collaborative efforts among its members. Our findings also revealed that Council members were deeply committed to the process and brought significant expertise and experience to the table. However, the structure and function of the Council were not flawless. We found challenges of representation, such as members being unevenly resourced, a lack of transparency in agenda setting and evaluation mechanisms, and barriers for members to engage or consult with wider audiences. Unfortunately, it is unclear how or if the Council will move forward. At the time of writing, the Council has not met since 2023, and no new appointments have been announced. Despite its challenges, the Council offers a useful mechanism for more participatory food governance in Canada, one that should be further strengthened by the government and supported by civil society organizations (albeit critically and carefully).

In these uncertain times, rather than a global governance deficit, as the Secretary of the United Nations has stated, (United Nations, 2024) we see a

³ The Food Communities Network (n.d.) and the John Hopkins Centre for a Livable Future (n.d.) have documented the evolution and different iterations (e.g. structure, scope, relation to government, scale) of food policy groups over time.

deficit of democracy. Lessons learned from the inaugural Council provide a window into how to strengthen participatory governance and democratic engagement. Amid a shift towards more authoritarian rule and corporate capture, we hope the Council (and our research) offers lessons on how to meaningfully

engage with knowledgeable and experienced actors while remaining accountable to producers, harvesters, Indigenous people, workers, and eaters across food systems.

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Jill Clark is a professor at the John Glenn College of Public Affairs, Ohio State University. Clark’s research focus is agrifood system policy and planning, centering on community and state governance of food systems and public engagement. Clark provides statewide leadership as a steering committee member of the Ohio Food Policy Network, international leadership as the past-president of the Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society, and local leadership as an appointment member of the city and county local food board. Clark recently was awarded the 2022 Excellence in Engaged Scholarship from the Engaged Scholarship Consortium.

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