



“It’s hard to be strategic when your hair is on fire”: alternative food movement leaders’ motivation and capacity to act

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Accepted: 22 January 2018 / Published online: 30 January 2018
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Abstract

Despite decades of struggle against the industrial food system, academics still question the impact of the alternative food movement. We consider what food movement leaders themselves say about their motivation to act and their capacity to scale up their impact. Based on semi-structured interviews with 27 food movement leaders in Michigan, our findings complicate the established academic narratives that revolve around notions of prefigurative and oppositional politics, and suggest pragmatic strategies that could scale up the pace and scope of food movement impacts. In contrast to the apolitical perspective some scholars see guiding alternative food movements, local leaders we interviewed see the food system from a structural-political lens. Though some see strength in fragmentation, most are not under the illusion that they can work alone and aspire to build their collective strength further. Concerns about organizational survival and conflicting views about the goals of the food movement, however, present ongoing challenges. Ultimately, we argue that there is a middle ground food movement leaders can walk between prefigurative and oppositional politics, one that still attempts to intentionally change the state, while also maintaining the inventiveness that can come from autonomous, grassroots initiatives. Specifically, interviewees suggested that increased strategic capacity around policy advocacy, critical food systems education, and negotiation could help them extend cross-movement networks and mainstream more equitable food policies, while continuing to experiment with customized solutions.

Keywords Food systems · Alternative food movement · Food governance · Strategic capacity · Michigan

Abbreviations

CSA Community supported agriculture
NGOs Non-governmental organizations
SNAP Supplemental nutrition assistance program

Introduction

Social movements have been growing for decades in response to the mounting “externalities” widely attributed to the corporate-dominated, industrial food system (Galt 2017, p. 1). The early roots of contemporary food movements,

especially in the United States, became most apparent during the 1960s as environmentalists reacted to the ecological effects of industrial agricultural practices promoted by Green Revolution policies (Grey and Patel 2015). A new wave of activism emerged in the 1980s as neoliberal policies solidified corporate power in the food and agriculture sector, causing an unprecedented loss of small and mid-sized farms around the world that could not compete on export markets (Friedmann and McMichael 1987). More recently, the 2008 world food crisis deepened the sense that the dominant food system fails most people (McMichael 2009). Labor activists have also sharpened attention on the long-standing exploitation of food and farm workers (Jayaraman and Schlosser 2013) while others have raised the profile of places with low access to affordable healthy diets (Raja et al. 2008; Shannon 2014). Today, food movements encompass organic food and vegetarianism, fair trade, slow food, local food, urban agriculture, food justice, food sovereignty, and other efforts, collectively referred to as the “alternative food movement”, because of their common attempt to replace the dominant

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food system with one that is fair, health-promoting, and ecologically sound (Galt 2017).

Even as scholars agree that food movements have made some progress, they disagree about strategies that could fundamentally, and permanently, change how food is produced and accessed (Mount 2012; Sbicca 2012; Clendenning et al. 2016). In part, the debate is similar to questions theorists are raising about the nature of social movements today, increasingly viewed as a form of prefigurative politics (Haenfler et al. 2012). Also known as lifestyle movements or “new” social movements, prefigurative activists distrust the ability of the state to provide people’s basic needs and therefore focus on personal transformation and strategies that “embody or ‘prefigure’ the kind of society they want to bring about” (Leach 2013, p. 1). While some theorists, including those who study the food movement (Hassanein 2003), expect that the spread of lifestyle movements will lead to structural change, little empirical research exists to examine these assumptions, while case studies suggest that movements based on prefigurative politics often lose momentum and “have yet to supplant mainstream institutions” (Leach 2013, p. 2). Those that are more skeptical argue that food movements must assume an oppositional or “contentious politics” model, a collective form of action that intentionally confronts economic elites and government policy (Allen et al. 2003; Haenfler et al. 2012). As these debates circulate within academic circles, they rarely engage food movement leaders themselves in the conversation, despite concerns that theoretical formulations of food movements often differ from those of practitioners (Kloppenburger et al. 1996; Raja et al. 2014).

We aim in this paper to offer a grounded understanding of factors that limit the potential impact of the alternative food movement. Drawing on interviews in Michigan with actors most invested in the food movement—local leaders—we ask: What salient issues compel food movement leaders to act? Do they believe they have the capacity to achieve structural change, especially via policy change? And to what extent are they attempting to collaborate with other food movement actors to build collective strength? Our findings point to pragmatic strategies that could scale up food systems change. Ultimately, we argue that there is a middle ground food movement leaders can walk between prefigurative and oppositional politics, one that still attempts to intentionally change the state, while also maintaining the inventiveness that can come from autonomous, grassroots initiatives. Before we expand on these findings, the remainder of this paper details the academic debates about food movements, why Michigan makes an ideal site to learn from food movement practitioners, and our paper’s methods and procedures.

Food movement debates

As researchers attempt to assess the degree to which alternative food movements are making progress, most see the variety of actions people are taking as dynamic, contributing to progressive changes and setbacks simultaneously (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011). Categorizing these nuanced perspectives into the “ideal types”¹ of either oppositional or prefigurative politics, however, starts to reveal that scholars may often be making contradictory assumptions about what food movement leaders should do differently to deepen their impact.

Researchers who are more hopeful about the prefigurative politics model tend to view fragmentation in the food movement as a strength. Rather than a lack of collaboration, they see a “food democracy”, where “different organizations can fill different niches, there are increased opportunities for citizen participation, and the multiplicity of thought and activism creates a vibrancy that leads to new forms of innovation and new ideas” (Hassanein 2003, p. 85). They argue that food movement leaders have a structural understanding of problems facing the food system and that their interventions—like community supported agriculture (CSAs), farmers markets, and cooperatives—are “insulated” spaces and “movements of self-protection” (Friedmann 1993, p. 218). Such actions allow communities to “de-link” from the universalizing, capitalist model, *because* they are fragmented, customized to their locality, and based on re-establishing producer and consumer relations (Kloppenburger et al. 1996; Wekerle 2004; McMichael 2016). They also see activities that ignore problematic policies or that bend rules—like farming on empty urban lots or running underground restaurants—as forms of “insurgent planning” (Wekerle 2004, p. 379) and “transgressive actions” (Schindler 2014, p. 369) that offer precedents for policy change (Reynolds and Cohen 2016).

Scholars who largely critique the alternative food movement for not being oppositional enough share a concern that, at best, food movements are too small-scale and fragmented to make a significant difference, or at worst, are unknowingly strengthening corporate power, exacerbating inequities, and absolving governments from intervening (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011; Alkon and Mares 2012; Finn 2017). These researchers suggest that too many food movement leaders have an apolitical view of problems facing the food system and are focused on changing individuals’ personal choices through education and market-based activities. They see CSAs, food hubs, and farmers markets, and especially campaigns to “vote with your fork” (DeLind 2011, p. 276), as

¹ Ideal types is an analytical device Max Weber suggested to simplify the process of explaining variation among cases (Hekman 1983).

privileging people who can afford to engage in “consumer citizenship” (Wald 2011, p. 568). They worry, too, that consumer-based and self-help actions, such as growing your own food, depoliticize hunger and other food system injustices by obfuscating the underlying causes, such as low wages, systemic racism, and regressive government policy (Shannon 2014; Weissman 2015). These scholars argue that fundamental change will only occur if food movements focus on “political will, not will power” (Guthman 2011, p. 138), and on linking disconnected, local movements to build collective power against governments and corporations (Allen et al. 2003; Sbicca 2012; Levkoe 2015).

Taken together, these prefigurative and oppositional politics framings suggest that today’s food movement actors are either: (1) aware of economic and political structures that shape the dominant food system, but are intentionally keeping their efforts fragmented and small-scale for strategic purposes, expecting that such actions will spread and eventually lead to large-scale structural change, or (2) unaware of underlying factors that shape the food system, and therefore, are unintentionally complicit in allowing the present structures to continue. Drawing on the concept of strategic capacity (Pelletier et al. 2012), we argue that both of these framings overlook another explanation: that food movement leaders may be aware of and desire to change structural elements that shape food systems but do not always have the socio-political and operational capacity to achieve faster, larger-scale change. Strategic capacity—or the “individual and institutional capacity to broker agreements, resolve conflicts, build relationships, respond to recurring challenges and opportunities, and undertake strategic communications”—refers to skills needed for forming stable coalitions that can shepherd desired reforms through all stages of the policy process, from agenda setting to policy implementation (Pelletier et al. 2012, p. 29). Without strategic capacity, we contend, food system activists may not even *attempt* to push for larger scale intervention, making it appear from the outside that they simply are unaware of the need for structural change or have no intention to move beyond small-scale actions.

Study location

Michigan offers an instructive location to explore how food movement leaders themselves explain the possibilities and limitations of their work for two reasons. First, we argue that Michigan is a “representative” case study (Hague et al. 1998)—a typical example of the wider food movement in the US—and as such, is likely to be reflective of the experiences of food movement actors elsewhere. Second, Michigan may also be a “prototypical” case (Hague et al. 1998)—a model from which late adopters are learning (Minnesota

Food Charter 2013; Hoey et al. 2017; USDA 2017)—and therefore, useful to study if food movements actors in other locations continue to look to Michigan as a model to follow.

Historically, the factors that gave rise to the alternative food movement in Michigan are similar to the reasons the movement has grown across the country. The leading role some communities—especially Ann Arbor and Detroit—played in the national environmental movement, labor activism, the start of the Students for a Democratic Society, and Vietnam and Civil Rights protests in the 1960s, laid the initial roots for grassroots organizing around food systems (Vinyard 2011; Glen 2017). Michigan was also especially affected by the 1980s global recession. In rural areas, as the state government invested heavily in industrial agriculture to increase exports and attract capital investment, many small and mid-sized farms failed or were absorbed by larger farms (DeLind and Benitez 1990). Smaller farms that survived had to be entrepreneurial, turning to more profitable fruit and vegetable production and direct sales through CSAs and farmers markets (Gregory et al. 2006).

Meanwhile, industrial flight and population decline shaped many of Michigan’s cities—especially Detroit—into the backbone of the rust belt (DeLind and Benitez 1990). Along with exclusionary zoning, white flight and the suburbanization and globalization of food retail left many urban areas with considerable amounts of vacant land, unemployment, and high food insecurity, all of which became strong motivators for the growth of urban agriculture, youth empowerment programs, and community-run food co-ops, especially many in Detroit run by Civil Rights and Black Power activists (White 2011; Pothukuchi 2015a, b). More recently, anger over the appointment of emergency managers in Detroit and other cities over the last 5 years (Bosman and Davey 2016), which received even closer scrutiny after the Flint water crisis (Hakala 2016), contributed further to a sense of disenfranchisement and a desire to regain a sense of community control through urban farming and other community-led food initiatives (Pothukuchi 2015b).

Out of this context, food movements in Michigan have grown rapidly. Based on a “locavore index” that tracks patterns of local food consumption, Michigan ranked 13th in 2017, up from 26th place in 2014 (Strolling of the Heifers 2017). This reflects changes over the last decade that show the proliferation of CSAs (Cocciarelli et al. 2011), a rise in farmers markets (MIFMA 2016), the emergence of numerous food hubs (Pirog et al. 2014), the growth in farm-to-school programs (Thompson and Matts 2015), the emergence of many volunteer-run food policy councils (Kelly and Gensler 2017) and the spread of networks uniting these efforts across the state (CRFS 2016). Organic farms and acreage have also continually expanded in Michigan over several decades (Cocciarelli et al. 2011; Bingen et al. 2007), while Michigan was recently a key testing ground

for incentives now included in the Farm Bill that double Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) dollars spent on local produce (Fair Food Network 2014). One of the first statewide food charters was also launched in Michigan in 2010 (Colasanti et al. 2010) as well as one of the first national chapters of the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, focused on restaurant worker rights (Jayaraman and Schlosser 2013). Detroit has also become an icon for its urban agriculture movement (Pothukuchi 2015a).

Methods and procedures

We drew on semi-structured interviews to explore how food movement leaders in Michigan view their work in the context of scholarly debates.² Semi-structured interviews—shaped around questions that focus on specific themes alongside probes to elicit more detailed responses—allow the interviewer to uncover the hidden aspects of human behavior, such as perceptions, motivations, intentions and how people make sense of the world around them (Qu and Dumay 2011). Interviews that elicit the stories of practitioners, in particular, offer insights about the strategies actors use to achieve their goals, the uncertainties they face, informal rules they follow and other subtleties that cannot be unearthed without talking directly with people about their lived realities (Forster 2016). Specifically, practitioner interviews allowed us to ground truth the assumptions scholars are making about the food movement.

Using purposive, network sampling, we aimed for a broad representation of food movement leaders. We invited interviewees repeatedly identified by others in Michigan's food movement as individuals or organizations making the most progress with efforts to build more equitable, ecologically sustainable and/or health-promoting food systems—in Michigan or beyond. As such, we engaged most of the key figures leading Michigan's food movements. Table 1 shows that participants are from a range of institutional affiliations, including local (city, county and state) government offices working on diverse issues (five participants), university centers and foundations leading educational and community-based initiatives (6), market-oriented organizations (e.g., launching food hubs, expanding farmers markets, etc.) (5), and nonprofits such as food banks, urban agriculture groups and food policy councils (11). These participants also represent a wide geographic spread, including:

- Ten who work in Detroit, a city in Southeast Michigan not only known for urban agriculture, but also the oldest produce terminal market, active food policy council, numerous grassroots food movement groups, and one of the first urban agriculture ordinances in Michigan. Detroit also has one of the highest poverty and food insecurity rates in the state (See Dewar and Thomas 2013; Pothukuchi 2015a).
- Six who work in Washtenaw County, also part of Southeast Michigan and known for its food council, farm incubator, numerous CSAs, food hub and more. In contrast to Detroit, however, this county has pockets of poverty, while the affluent city of Ann Arbor lowers the county's state-wide ranking on food security measures³; and
- Eleven who lead projects with multiple communities across the state, by supporting the spread of farmers markets, food assistance initiatives, food systems networks, food hubs, or other activities.

Interviews were completed between January and June, 2014 and lasted an average of 70 min. They were audio recorded, transcribed, and returned to participants for editing. Transcriptions were coded iteratively, using a combination of inductive analysis, based on what emerged from the interviews, and deductive analysis, based on debates in the food movement literature (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). To demonstrate the diversity of speakers who contributed to themes emerging in the analysis, interviewee numbers from Table 1 are noted in brackets after quotes throughout the “Findings” section. A summary of the major themes are displayed in Table 2.

Findings

In contrast to seeing the food system through an apolitical perspective, leaders we interviewed in Michigan largely viewed the issues motivating them to act through a political economy lens. Nearly two-thirds have attempted to change policy in some way and most would like to be more effective, but cite challenges with the effort required to change national policy, and at the local level, the low capacity of government officials to respond and the lack of inclusion in policy decisions. While some see strength in the fragmentation that characterizes much of the alternative food movement, the majority simultaneously spoke about how partnerships have been and will continue to be key to deepening their impact. Their efforts to collaborate further, however,

² Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The study was approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board (IRB).

³ See <http://www.map.feedingamerica.org/county/2014/overall> or http://www.ewashtenaw.org/government/departments/public_health/health-promotion/hip.

Table 1 Food movement leaders interviewed, by geographic focus and institutional affiliation

	Geographic focus			Institutional affiliation			
	Detroit	Washtenaw County	Statewide	Local government	Universities, foundation	Market-oriented	Non-profit
1.	X			X			x
2.	X			x	X	x	
3.	x		X		X		
4.	X					X	x
5.	X					X	x
6.	X			x			X
7.	X		x				X
8.	X						X
9.	X						X
10.	X		x				X
11.	X		x				X
12.		X		X			
13.		X		X			x
14.		X		X			
15.		X				X	x
16.		X					X
17.		X				x	X
18.			X	X	x		x
19.			X		X		
20.			X		X		
21.			X		X		
22.			X		X		
23.			X			X	x
24.			X	x		X	
25.			X				X
26.			X				X
27.			X				X
Total	10	6	11	5	6	5	11

The large X indicates main geographic focus or affiliation, and the small x indicates additional links. The total sums the main focus/affiliation. The number of each row is used in place of names to ensure confidentiality and corresponds to quotes in the "Findings" section

have been limited by concerns about organizational survival and conflicting goals within the food movement. Overall, there were few differences across these major themes based on the geographic focus or institutional affiliation of interviewees (Table 2), suggesting convergent experiences.

Issues motivating food movement leaders to act

Food movement leaders we interviewed are facilitating food systems change in a variety of ways, including policy advocacy (more below), initiatives to improve food access (e.g., for farmers markets to accept SNAP, for food banks to offer local produce), strategies to rebuild the local food economy (e.g., incubator kitchens, local food purchasing campaigns, hoop houses for season extension) and a variety of ways to educate and motivate the public

to take action (e.g., developing K-12 and university curricula, training community health advocates, hosting food summits). The reason for these actions, they described, is their concern over problematic policies, the effects of an industrial, corporate-dominated food system and limited public awareness and misinformation largely generated by corporate interests.

Problematic policies

Nearly all interviewees (93%) believe problematic policies have created or perpetuate many of the current problems with the food system. Three quarters (74%) are specifically concerned about national-level policy, because, as one person described:

Table 2 Proportion of food movement leaders by geographic focus and institutional affiliation who are motivated to act for similar reasons, are trying to change policy, see similar issues challenging policy advocacy, rely on partnerships, think collaboration could deepen, and see similar issues complicating collective action

	Total N = 27	Geographic focus			Institutional affiliation			
		Detroit N = 10	Washtenaw County N = 6	State-wide N = 11	Local government N = 5	Universities, foundations N = 6	Market-oriented N = 5	Non-profit N = 11
Issues motivating food movement leaders to act								
1. Problematic policies	93	90	83	100	100	100	100	82
a. Federal policy issues	74	70	83	73	60	83	60	82
b. Local, state policy issues	78	70	67	91	80	83	80	73
2. Effects of corporate power	93	90	100	91	80	100	100	91
a. Poor food access	56	60	50	55	60	50	20	73
b. Weak local food economies	44	50	83	18	40	0	100	45
c. Threats to food sovereignty	41	70	33	18	40	50	20	45
d. Environmental impacts	30	40	17	27	40	33	20	27
e. Food and farm worker issues	26	30	17	27	0	50	20	27
3. Lack of public awareness	74	90	83	55	80	67	100	64
Food movement leaders actively trying to change policy and issues they identify that challenge policy advocacy								
4. Actively trying to change policy	67	50	67	82	80	67	40	73
5. Problems with inclusion	56	60	50	55	40	67	40	64
6. Weak government capacity	41	40	50	36	100	17	40	36
Food movement leaders who currently rely on partnerships, who believe collaboration could deepen, and who agree about the issues that complicate further collective action								
7. Partnerships currently key	67	70	33	82	60	50	80	73
8. Collaboration could deepen	93	90	100	91	100	83	100	91
a. Spaces for co-learning key	39	20	50	55	20	50	60	36
9. Organizational survival issues	85	80	100	82	100	67	80	91
10. Disagreement over goals	59	70	17	73	20	83	100	45
a. Partner with agroindustry?	41	60	0	45	20	50	40	45
b. Focus on hunger or farmers?	30	70	0	9	20	33	40	27
c. Leverage fragmentation?	30	40	17	27	0	33	60	27

Numbers other than Ns are percentages

Federal policy is a blueprint for what our food system looks like... What would it take to get 5% of that 80 billion dollars [in the Farm Bill] focused on healthier eating and supporting local farmers in regional agriculture? ...You start to do that and the issues of health disparities due to diet and the economic barriers for farmers and small scale agriculture...dissolve because you shifted the structure [26].

Another person described a need to focus on policy for the sake of ensuring that the legacy of the food movement lives on and keeps expanding, noting how “You can get as much food and access in the communities and all that—that’s fantastic—but...we have to create laws so that our legacy lives on... I have to make sure that systems are in

place so that [others] can then take that torch, follow my footsteps and add to the foundation which I try to lay” [5].

Interviewees would like to see a shift in the federal subsidies that create an uneven playing field for small producers. Others want to see a stronger government social safety net connected to food (e.g., SNAP funding) and an increase in the federal minimum wage that affects poverty and therefore food insecurity. Some also mentioned the need for policies to reduce barriers for the future generation of farmers, market incentives to attract grocery stores to communities that lack affordable fresh produce, clearer labeling to identify the source of food and to track food scares, and other incentives to support the purchase of local, healthy food.

More than three quarters (78%) also believe policy changes are needed at lower government levels. As one person noted, "the changing look of the food (policy) system is a lot of square pegs in round holes" [17], full of restrictive land use laws and onerous licensing, food safety requirements, and food production regulations more appropriate for large-scale systems. Other actors have encountered grey legal ground around community kitchens, micro-food businesses (including food trucks), food sampling, cooking demonstrations, local food purchasing, and urban farm sales.

Effects of corporate power

Nearly all interviewees (93%) are also animated over issues they see emerging out of corporate consolidation of the food system. Over half (56%) are concerned about poor access to fresh, local food. Most spoke specifically about inequitable food access, blaming it on a "market failure" that has pushed large-scale grocery stores into the wealthiest areas to maintain a thin profit margin, leaving behind "the high margin foods people can afford, which are typically junk food" [3]. Others (44%)—especially interviewees engaged in market-oriented activities (Table 2)—discussed how concentrated ownership in the food system is affecting local economies. These actors discussed how "the evils of oligopoly" [4] have reduced competition in the market and "created a great, giant industrialized system that we no longer have any sort of control over...that doesn't protect food security, doesn't encourage healthy food access" [13]. Many are worried about the ability of small farmers to make a viable living, pointing to the need for decentralized distribution and processing infrastructure so that local farmers can move beyond direct sales. On a hopeful note, one person sees the concentration of ownership as quite "fragile" [15], capable of being undermined easily if enough people create business models to democratize ownership, such as cooperatives, social enterprises, B Corporations, food hubs and other alternative distribution models.

On a related note, those who spoke specifically about food sovereignty (41%) discussed how corporate consolidation limits access to land, encourages undemocratic decisions about the structure of the food system, and treats food as a commodity, not as a human right. This view was particularly strong among Detroit interviewees (Table 2). One activist in this group discussed how corporations are contributing to "food system apartheid across America" as they target "the Food Channel foodie culture...people who have purchasing power" at the same time that "the dollar menu was crafted to suck in poor people at their price point" [6]. Another person described why gardening in this context becomes "a weapon", a tool that "returns us to being creators, instead of being simply purchasers" [9].

At least a third were also concerned about the environmental impacts of an industrial food system (30%), worrying about the contribution of large-scale production—especially meat—to greenhouse gasses and climate change, the energy required for long transportation routes and the effects of industrial practices on topsoil, groundwater and ocean dead zones. A quarter (26%) were also concerned about the mistreatment, the lack of living wages and unsafe working conditions of food and farm workers. As one person noted, "It's hard to find any place in the supply chain where you don't find some kind of abuse. ... You can't criticize the system for not feeding us, because it does do that. Is it worth it? [3]".

Lack of public awareness

Nearly three quarters (74%) of interviewees also talked about the ways that limited public awareness prevents change. Many noted a "knowledge gap" [7, 16], discussing how "detached people are from our waste stream" [6] and how food corporations have "adulterated the tastes and desires of consumers" [21], distancing eaters from their food sources and making them dependent on a highly industrialized food model. This means that people "lack real literacy about food... Not enough people are motivated or empowered to stand up and say, 'This is what I need, this is what I deserve'" [21]. Others think they've "tapped out" people who are "naturally inclined" [4] to buy local food, requiring more consciousness raising. Several are also concerned that misinformation can make people resist locating certain efforts in their neighborhoods, like urban agriculture, hoop-houses or even a new grocery store. Another person sees the US in a vicious cycle because of the miseducation of the public, where "we've developed a [food] culture around messed-up policies, and now our messed-up culture impacts [and perpetuates] our messed-up policies. Where do you start to solve that?" [15].

Views on policy advocacy

Aligned with what motivates them to act, two-thirds (67%) of interviewees discussed their efforts to change policy. At the federal level, several actors were key to inserting healthy food financing in the 2014 Farm Bill. Others noted their successful campaigns that led to soda tax referenda in many US cities. Locally, some helped pass a Michigan Cottage Food Law, launch the Detroit Food Policy Council, Detroit Food Security Policy, and Detroit Urban Agriculture Ordinance, while others started a public sector local food procurement policy in Washtenaw County. Most, however, discussed the barriers that prevent them from being more effective around policy change. Especially at the national level, interviewees were uncertain how to act at such a high level—how to access policymakers or what strategies could influence

policy—while others noted that “it’s slower going change... [and] the long-term goal” [25]. This is why most organizations simultaneously or exclusively focus on “the personal level” [25], on local activities that “connect with immediate needs” [7], like doubling SNAP benefits, emergency food, or nutrition education. Still, most would at least like to engage in more effective policy advocacy at the local level, since it affects their work more immediately. But they spoke about how decision-making often excludes grassroots voices and how local government actors frequently lack the capacity to respond to innovative initiatives, discussed further below.

Issues with inclusion in policymaking

More than half (56%) of interviewees find local government decision-makers to be reactive to proposals put before them, instead of being proactive about taking into account the values, experience and priorities of actors driving the alternative food movement. Many actors, for instance, spoke about how policymakers are often overlooking “the grassroots—really low-income neighborhoods more passionate about locally grown sustainable food than any Whole Foods shopping foodie person” [3]. Five people from Detroit worry that local decision makers only take seriously large-scale economic development proposals, what one actor called the “big shiny object—what can make the biggest splash...folks who have money” [1]. To many, a clear example of this latter concern is Hantz Farm—a 150-acre for-profit tree farm that the City agreed to while Detroit was under emergency management (Burns 2014), what many local and national food activists see as a “land grab” of publicly-owned, devalued land (Holt-Giménez 2012; Pothukuchi 2015a). This experience taught several interviewees that food movement actors must fight the intentions behind endeavors that, on the surface, can appear benign to uninformed planners or other government decision-makers:

There’s a big difference between D-town Farm [run by the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network] and Hantz Farm... The food system is like a safe haven for all types of shadowy elements and some very high-functioning human dignity elements all comingled together. We need to really do a root cause analysis on why we’re doing things, who is operating in the food system so we can fully unearth intent but also bring up and out the greatest good and not just exploitation, extraction and opportunistic work [6].

Many interviewees, however, also locate the problem within the food movement, seeing policy analysis and advocacy itself as problematic because it often lacks community voices. Reiterating that experts are not making progress in solving food systems problems, one person concluded that “Scholars should get out of their Ivory Towers and go to a

potluck...[because] there is a disconnect between what data says and the experience of...being at a local food summit and 300 people...figuring out together what could make it better for all of them” [15]. Another activist similarly went on to explain why she thinks food policy advocacy has become “professionalized” [6]:

Almost 95% of all...activists and mobilizers in the food system are degreed people. Half of Detroit doesn’t even have a high school diploma. We’ve professionalized advocacy... We need highly functioning individuals with capacity and skills to debate and dialogue, and organizations too, but definitely, this highly professionalized, tokenized advocacy system we’ve developed—it’s not serving us. It’s actually creating half the problems in Detroit... If Detroit is going to have any level of problem-solving on its own behalf, we’re going to have to recalibrate the standing agency and the voice of the individual, because we’ve been deferring for 40 years to organizations who knew better [6].

Enabling more people—especially marginalized voices—to be a part of such problem solving and collective visioning, another person described, requires empowering individuals to become “critical thinkers and active participants in shaping their future”:

We have this historical trauma associated with slavery...[which created] internalized oppression [in the African American community]...There is all this baggage we have as a result of that. Sometimes lack of confidence, lack of trust in yourself or in others...We are unapologetically dedicated to our community, but by lifting ourselves up we lift up all of humanity...So although our primary concern is uplifting the African-American community, [when we advocate for] a good policy [it] impacts us all [8].

Weak government capacity

In addition to issues with inclusion, a large number (41%) of actors believe that another cause of problematic policies at the local level is limited government capacity to lead food policy decisions. Interviewees discussed policy gains in some places, but also noted that they had to reinvent the wheel or that “people had to fight” [5]. They repeated that local governments are rarely *proactively* trying to support the flurry of activity emerging from the alternative food movement. Most find local decision-makers to be risk averse to untried policies, new business models and land use types that do not yet exist. The result is slow local government action, the discouragement of many ideas from flourishing, and various work-around

reactions on the part of food movement leaders. Actors noted, for instance, how zoning officials, economic development departments and public works offices often lack basic knowledge about how to adapt permitting or zoning to support food systems proposals. In one example, state legislators did not know how to respond to the first farmers markets that wanted to accept SNAP because they were not "brick and mortar stores." After years of advising zoning and business practices to establish farmers markets and other food enterprises across the state, another person observed: "There's a real gap on the whole delivery... How do you give [local leaders] some knowledge, some expertise, so they can comfortably have those conversations? I think all too often we assume they have it and I don't think they do" [24]. In other cases, there are no policies in place—for or against a proposed practice—which forces people to make a choice about moving forward with something that is essentially illicit, or enter into a long process of developing official regulation, as one person described with food trucks:

Food can be used as an economic empowerment tool... You see all of these alternative business models that are starting to pop up around food that allow people—immigrants, low-income, low-wealth, second career, entrepreneurs, small-business owners—to start businesses in their community... You see it across the nation, but Detroit has no policy, so food trucks are essentially illegal. People can do it, but...they aren't zoned appropriately, you can't get a license to operate one...[or] get your food inspected, because there's nothing on the books that says "this is legal—you can do this." Those [are the] types of policies that prohibit people from being entrepreneurial [5].

The five local government actors we interviewed also admit they do not have the capacity to effectively support food system change. They often feel like they should just "get out of the way" [13] of community-based initiatives and see food planning as "new territory" [1] with few precedents, making it difficult for them to know how to lead or assess new proposals. One urban planner admitted, "The City is not equipped to make those determinations...we have no frame of reference" [1]. That said, this same planner showed how champions within government can still find ways to operate in this new terrain. To develop her city's urban agriculture ordinance, she and others convened a working group made up of private sector actors and community groups by "listening to and talking to a lot of people" and reaching out to others who could bring needed skills to the table, including "people in the city that are very good at conflict resolution" [1].

Views on collaboration

When asked to talk about how, or whether, food movement actors are working together, a third (30%) of interviewees agree that there is fragmentation, but they see this as a strength. Most actors (67%), however, noted that they rely on partnerships to advance their work. Nearly all (93%) agreed that there is also a need to build their collective strength even further, since "movements that galvanize large numbers of people usually have more impact" [8]. Over a third (39%) believe that Collective Impact (Kania and Kramer 2011), shared measurement or improved evaluation strategies could help the broader food movement "get away from disjointed work" [27]. As one person from a state-wide organization trying to play a convening role around these types of activities noted: "What we want to do is help play that role as a backbone organization that can help all of these groups communicate with each other, learn from each other, network, and then do things that are complementary, not redundant, not piecemeal like what you've seen in the critiques of the literature" [22]. Two key issues, however, have so far limited the amount of collaboration interviewees would prefer to see: struggles over organizational survival and debates about goals.

Struggles with organizational survival

Over 85% of actors agreed that a major barrier that keeps food movement groups from working together more strategically is a pragmatic focus on organizational survival. The need to attend to day-to-day administrative tasks drains local leaders of the time needed to engage in collective analysis and planning. The reality is, building "trust with organizations and, in a practical sense, aligning work with other organizations that would be logical partners just takes time; it's hard to do" [25]. Another person agreed, noting:

We have so many players, both private NGOs (non-governmental organizations) to large NGOs to academic institutions...interested in poverty issues and food systems. They're all great, motivated for the right reasons, but it makes it so hard to coordinate, to measure and agree on impacts... Even to convene all the people that are involved in our food system is a nightmare. You spend all your time doing that and you don't even get to the content [16].

Similarly, one person talking about urban agriculture organizations believes that groups tend to interact with each other over "practical, operational [aspects, like] markets and gardens, technical assistance, contracts... fundraising and programming" [2], leaving little time for difficult conversations. Another person noted that this instrumental focus especially intensified during the most recent economic

downturn, as smaller organizations scaled back to their essential functions:

Name something from schools to crime, food, housing and homelessness, and economic development—there's a host of issues [where] that heightened sense of turmoil really did impact a lot of organizations' ability to collaborate. They had to sort of hunker down and focus their energy and core competencies... As one former boss of mine was fond of saying, "It's hard to be strategic when your hair is on fire" [7].

Some leaders additionally worry that the need to focus on organizational survival is increasing because the number, size and influence of particular organizations has expanded. In some cases, this is leading to a sense of ownership for "my issue...[and] my geographic community" [10]. Three actors noted that this is particularly apparent in places where farmers markets are competing for the same customers, where in one case, conversations about how best to coordinate efforts are "happening in very bitter and resentful ways" [2]. This person went on to explain how, as some organizations grow, new staff come in and take over roles, "without any history of the conversations and the deal-making and the networking that had happened previous to their time". "Unequal growth" has also led to the more well-known organizations outcompeting and straining the ability of smaller, less-resourced groups to continue their work, leading them to ask, "Given this map of players, given the capacity that each has, how can we think about our unique role and unique contribution that can push us all towards the goals that we've articulated without hurting each other? That is a difficult conversation" [2].

Debates about goals

A second, interconnected issue that complicates collaboration, 59% of actors explained, is debates about the goals of the alternative food movement and limited spaces to critically analyze and negotiate a collective direction. As one person noted, "I don't think we've identified what our goals are. If you look at what 'movements' are, usually they're pretty defined. You ask 'What do we want?' And folks can literally shout it. So, what are folks going to be shouting about in the streets? To me, it feels like there's a lot of little different movements" [9]. Another person described how varied interventions and perspectives create "contradictions [that] provide a way of growing," but only if actors take advantage of the "opportunity for debate and the study of practice" [8]. Several people worry that food movement actors sometimes "see what they want to see" [12], contributing to "band-aid solutions" [6] because they react to local needs without trying to understand the root, structural causes of social, environmental and economic problems.

One activist referred to these actors as "turkey sandwich passer outers":

Nobody's thinking about *why* you're hungry and need a turkey sandwich. Nobody is even really thinking about, to a great degree, *where* the turkey is coming from... It's just "you're hungry and in this moment we're going to provide for you" ... Are we so fragmented that we're just never going to have a systemic [approach] or no synergy? ...Because we talk it but we don't walk it. We talk, "oh yeah, we're for dignity and food sovereignty and food security and food justice." Really, we're just in transaction: "Leave us alone. We're not trying to shift. We're not trying to really do an analysis. We just see hungry people" [6].

One specific difference of opinion, discussed by 41% of actors, is whether partnering with the private sector—particularly large-scale agri-food companies—serves to perpetuate or resolve problems in the food system. Interviewees who are adamant that "the animosity between Big Ag and Little Ag is something we can't afford" [4] are firmly on one side of the debate. They argue that all scales of agriculture are needed to develop a viable food system and that convincing investors or commodity farmers to see local foods differently—as a business opportunity to supply the fresh food market—is more effective and faster than forcing investors and producers to change through policy. As one person noted, "It's not just the government [that can fix the food system], and do we want to wait that long?" [27].

A similar number of actors, however, are convinced that the capitalist model is so fundamentally flawed, corporations will never put health, environment or equity concerns above profit. Several also worried that, without a clearer articulation of food movement goals and potential partners, they may be preparing the stage for corporations to co-opt alternative food movement solutions. As one person noted: "food activists need to be extremely careful with language we use because we...talk about economic opportunities around urban agriculture, and then we see hundreds of acres of land being bought up to start huge urban farms. So you start talking money and people start listening. If it's co-optable, it's probably not radical enough" [9].

Another issue related to goals is a tension that 30% of actors—especially interviewees in Detroit (Table 2)—see between anti-hunger groups and those working to improve farmer livelihoods and practices. While some organizations, such as urban agriculture groups, are actively trying to do both, interviewees are concerned that organizations focused on only one need are either ignoring or undermining the other goal. One actor involved in national level policy advocacy noted how this divide is causing competition over resources, particularly apparent during the development of the last Farm Bill, where he observed how "hunger advocates and the food

access and sustainable ag people just could not agree on some fundamental things, especially around the SNAP program" [3].

A third (30%) of actors are also conflicted over whether or how formally to partner with other food movement organizations, because they believe that fragmentation can be an asset. One person, for instance, believes that the uncoordinated nature of most food movements has created "an opportunity for a lot of people to try a lot of different things and learn from each other too" [9]. To them, fragmentation means the movement has no "official spokespersons, no official leadership" [9], which is a reflection of the democratic process—the expression of differing values, priorities and goals. Another person spoke about how fragmentation allows groups to customize solutions for local communities, and to address different aspects of a complex problem, "because there's not just one problem to solve" [15]. Describing the food movement as "emergent...(and) self-organizing", this person went on to describe how fragmentation creates a challenging terrain for corporate interests to maneuver, echoing an argument they heard at a national Slow Food meeting:

Monsanto and Walmart and Hershey's are waiting for us to come to Washington D.C., because they already know that game. They know they can fight us there. ... The politicians there are already in the pockets of those big corporations. The thing that these companies don't have are people on the ground and this sort of grassroots, bottom-up, kind of change that people make individually on a day-to-day basis... It's about creating the future that we want... I don't know if I can do anything about Monsanto, but I think that I can do something about and think about a future worth working towards [15].

Another activist similarly expressed how a fragmented structure can empower community-based activists while disempowering the ability of government and corporate actors to monitor or undermine various movements:

Sometimes I think a hands-off approach is best to really foster grassroots capacity, whether that approach is deliberate or accidental because the City has no resources. It keeps the big players at bay because there's no framework for them. That's sort of the anarchist in me! There's enough evidence about when government gets involved and things get formalized and regularized, ordinary people don't have any say or lose ground [2].

Discussion

The views and strategies of food movement leaders, in this case, complicate the academic debate that tends to revolve around prefigurative or oppositional politics narratives. Some interviewees reaffirmed that much of the food

movement is fragmented, framing it in a positive light, because it gives them protected spaces to "create the future that we want" [15]. Most, however, challenged the notion that they are working in isolation and that they are relieving the state of its duties to intervene. Instead, they are quite aware of, and driven to address, concentrated economic power and problematic policies in the food system. Moreover, practitioners we engaged extend the debate about food movements by revealing a number of ways strategic capacity could enable aspirations they have to engage in more effective policy advocacy and collective action.

Towards strategic capacity for policy advocacy

While some interviewees have successfully engaged in national policy change, most are daunted by the time and political access needed to shift policy at the federal level. Among the many interviewees who are attempting to shift policy, therefore, most focus their energy on local-level government, as other food movement studies have found (Allen et al. 2003). However, this study also reveals why change even at this level remains a challenge, as the risk aversion of public sector actors, the slow pace of changing legislation, and the ongoing exclusion of many voices in food policy decision-making means that "people had to fight" [5] to achieve policy gains. This explains why many food movement leaders look for faster ways to facilitate change through private sector initiatives or on their own, sometimes via activities that are on grey legal ground.

Food movement leaders will continue sidestepping public agencies to get many things done (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011; Pothukuchi 2015b). However, the Hantz Farm proposal discussed by many actors in this study suggests that even if local governments are rarely *leading* food policy, public sector decision-makers may *undermine* the values and efforts of food movement actors if they become enamored by the "big shiny object" [1]. Such well-financed proposals are likely to become more common, given the increased corporate interest in the alternatives food system leaders are devising (Jaffee and Howard 2010; Anada 2011; Agyeman and McEntee 2014), and the fact that growth machine politics often drive urban food policy (Bedore 2014; Pothukuchi 2015b). When possible, however, food policy champions may be able tap into the priorities of local governments to entice decision-makers to proactively seek out the ideas of food movement actors long before another shiny object comes their way (Roberts 2014), even if such efforts result only in a tentative institutionalization of more progressive food systems planning (Raja et al. 2014; Horst 2017).

Interviewees also recognized the need to better prepare the public to stand up and say, "This is what I need, this is what I deserve" [21]. Rather than the form of depoliticized education that focuses on changing personal shopping

patterns—as many scholars critique—leaders we spoke to implied a need for “critical food systems education”, a form of consciousness raising that prepares people to advocate for policy and economic changes that can transform the food system (Meek and Tarlau 2016, p. 237). People spoke, for instance, about the need for food “literacy” that can empower people to undo a cycle of policies and corporate practices that have “adulterated...tastes and desires” [21]. Others want to rectify “professionalized, tokenized advocacy” [6] while some are finding ways to apply a structural racism lens that empowers communities of color to push for progressive food policy change that “uplifts” their community [8] even as such policies introduce positive food systems changes for the wider public too.

Towards strategic capacity for collective action

The other major concern interviewees raised was not having sufficient time to engage in coalition building and collective debate, for several reasons. In part, they suggested that the day-to-day stress of ensuring their organizations’ survival drains them of the time to strategize with others, limiting their interactions to coordinating around “operational” activities. Guthman (2008, p. 1180) too has found that many food justice organizations must “focus on putting out fires,” restricting what they can achieve to “the fundable, the organizable, [and] the scale of effective action”. Interviewees also alluded to a related pattern among US nonprofits, where foundation dollars are often funneled to well-resourced organizations that have greater capacity, potentially reducing funding for more radical, grassroots groups (INCITE! 2009; LeChasseur 2016). Compounding concerns over organizational survival, we also heard disagreements over the substantive goals (e.g., anti-hunger, farmer livelihoods, or ecological protection) and the strategies of the food movement (e.g., who to partner with, whether to remain fragmented). Some of this heterogeneity may be due to the pragmatic need for organizations to prioritize, since, as one of person said, “there’s not just one problem to solve” [15]. However, emerging tensions over the sense of ownership for “my issue...[and] my geographic community” [10], or other “bitter and resentful” [2] interactions raise concerns that such conflict could impede coalition building efforts, as it has in other food movement communities (Hill et al. 2011; Hoey et al. 2017; Nisbett et al. 2015).

Addressing the twin concerns of organizational survival and disagreements over goals will require that food movement leaders have a “difficult conversation”, as one person noted, to “think about our unique role and unique contribution that can push us all towards the goals that we’ve articulated without hurting each other” [2]. Many interviewees suggested that Collective Impact networks could enable some of this dialogue, similar to state-wide and regional

food systems initiatives forming in Michigan and elsewhere (Fink-Shapiro et al. 2015). If tensions exist in some communities, however, research suggests that emerging networks will be most effective if they encourage—and build the capacity of—diverse voices to engage in high risk debates, resolve conflicts, rethink organizational roles, and critique power structures (Vandeventer and Mandell 2007). If the structure and nature of these discussions can be driven by more marginalized voices, in particular, and get at a “root cause analysis” [6], then collaborative food system initiatives may be able to move beyond depoliticized analysis and strategies, a criticism of other Collective Impact initiatives (Hoey et al. 2017; Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011). To ensure that “contradictions provide a way of growing... through debate and the study of practice” [8], interviewees recognized that more food movement actors need the “capacity and skills to debate and dialogue” [8, 6]. Specifically, skills to facilitate multi-party negotiation and mediation could help forge unexpected alliances in places that experience historical tensions, conflict, and power differences (Innes and Booher 2010; Sbicca 2012; Forester 2013), much like how the Detroit Urban Agriculture Ordinance was facilitated (Pothukuchi 2015a).

Conclusion

As the alternative food movement continues to grow in diverse economic, social and political contexts in the US and elsewhere, further research should examine the extent to which the story unfolding in this study resembles other experiences. In many ways, local leaders we interviewed were more politically active and collaborative than what theories about prefigurative politics explain. This may indicate that food movements are taking on more of an oppositional politics approach. At least in Michigan, local leaders may be more mobilized because of the state’s progressive roots (Vinyard 2011; Glen 2017), the crippling economic effect of the “lost decade” of the 2000s and Great Recession (Ghallager 2016), and the experience of so many emergency manager takeovers (Hakala 2016). Even amidst the many achievements apparent in Michigan’s food movement, however, local leaders we spoke to still acknowledged that “It’s hard to be strategic when your hair is on fire” [7], citing how difficult it can be to engage in more collective action when organizational survival is uncertain, especially in light of additional risks they face with corporate co-optation and growth machine politics (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011; Pothukuchi 2015b; Bedore 2014; Reynolds and Cohen 2016). Greater strategic capacity in this context, then, may still only allow incremental progress, but it at least offers pragmatic steps for deepening the impacts of the alternative food movement. In this case, interviewees suggested that if

they were armed with more effective skills around policy advocacy, critical food systems education, and negotiation, they could blend the best of prefigurative and oppositional politics, extending cross-movement networks and mainstreaming more equitable food policies, while continuing to experiment with customized solutions.

A number of efforts that emerged since these interviews were completed demonstrate how Michigan food movement leaders have been moving in this direction and addressing some of the challenges they raised. Building on the work of groups long known for their focus on issues of racial equity—such as the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and Detroit Food Policy Council (White 2011; Yakini 2017)—other leading organizations have also adopted an equity lens, suggesting that issues of inclusion in the food movement are rising to the forefront across the state (Kellogg Foundation 2015; Pirog et al. 2015). Additional policy gains—such as federal and state funding for a Healthy Food Financing Initiative and a local food purchasing program being piloted in public school districts—also signal that food movement leaders are gaining traction with policymakers (Michigan Good Food Fund, n.d.; GCRC 2016). The growth of local and state-wide food summits, food policy councils, and a “network of networks” further suggests that there may be an increasing number of fora available to co-learn and to work out potentially conflicting goals (Colasanti and Sexton 2016).

In addition to further research on the skills and mechanisms that could strengthen the strategic capacities of food movement champions in different contexts, the rapid changes that have already occurred in Michigan since the time of these interviews suggest the need for more longitudinal studies that track food movements over time, especially around issues of inclusion, conflicting goals, organizational survival, and policy action. Especially for food system scholars who recognize that their work can play a performative role, more grounded research generally would advance the potential to impact the direction of the alternative food movement (Reynolds and Cohen 2016).

Acknowledgements We would like to thank the numerous food movement leaders in Michigan who shared their time and insight for the interviews we conducted in this study. We also thank Kameshwari (Kami) Pothukuchi, Rich Pirog, Kathryn Colasanti, Lilly Fink Shapiro, Robert Fishman, Scott Campbell, Harley Etienne, Ana Paula Pimentel Walker, Joy Knoblauch, and the blind reviewers for their invaluable feedback on earlier drafts. This project would also not have been possible without University of Michigan MCubed funding, and students who engaged in early discussions and literature reviews, including Danielle Rivera, Kelly McGraw and graduate research teams led by John Vandermeer and Ivette Perfecto. We chose not to directly identify individuals or organizations we interviewed, as most asked to remain anonymous and worried that revealing some, and not others, might contribute to inequitable representation of the accomplishments of some actors over others. However, we do want to dedicate this article to the memory of Charity Hicks, who asked us explicitly to name her

as a contributor. We only had the chance to get to know Charity during the interview we conducted with her a month before her tragic death. She left us with a lasting impression of what it means to be a relentless activist and “movement weaver”, as someone who linked food movements with the fight for water rights and many other grassroots struggles in Detroit and nationally (see <http://www.onthecommons.org/magazine/commoner/remembering-charity-hicks>).

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