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## **Towards a trans-local food governance: Exploring the transformative capacity of food policy assemblages in the US and UK**

### **Abstract**

A diversity of cross-sectoral, multi-scalar networks are emerging to connect place-based food governance initiatives, such as food policy councils and partnerships, aimed to foster sustainable food security. Yet little research has explored how local food policy groups (LFPGs) are (horizontally) connecting to share knowledge and resources, or interacting (vertically) with other scales of food governance. To address this gap, we examine the trans-local dimension of food policy networks—and its potential to facilitate transformative food system reform. We build on alternative food network, social network, and assemblage thinking to develop an analytical framework that unveils the mobile, unstable, and relational processes and spatialities of LFPGs and the networks which connect them. Through an action-research project comprising a comparative analysis of the Food Policy Networks project in the US and Sustainable Food Cities Network in the UK, we explore how LFPGs connect across different scales and emerge as social-spatial assemblages of food system knowledge, practices, and infrastructure. The findings suggest that conceptualizing these entities as dynamic and place-contingent enables evaluations of their relations and effects to account for features that (could) make them more interconnected, resilient, and transformative, but may also limit their ability to address structurally entrenched food system challenges.

### **1. Introduction**

A new geography of food policy networks is transforming the food governance landscape. In the last decade, academics and practitioners have devoted increasing attention to how municipalities can

31 foster sustainable food security through holistic and place-based strategies that integrate health,  
32 environmental, social, and economic dimensions (Sonnino *et al.*, 2014; Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015).  
33 Epitomizing local innovations in food system governance are food (policy) councils or partnerships—  
34 hereafter local food policy groups (LFPGs), as coined by Halliday (2015)—which have been rapidly  
35 emerging across industrialized countries. These groups assemble stakeholders from government, civil  
36 society, and the private sector to reform food policy and programs, as well as foster new relationships  
37 and interconnections between food system initiatives at municipal and state/provincial, regional, and  
38 tribal/First Nations levels.<sup>1</sup> Place-based LFPGs have recently started collaborating in wider alliances, at  
39 global (e.g., Milan Food Policy Pact), regional (e.g., EAT Nordic Cities Initiative, African Food Security  
40 Urban Network) and national levels, generally aimed at cross-pollinating good practices. These  
41 alliances—or trans-local networks of place-based LFPGs—posit new questions around the role of multi-  
42 level and multi-site networks in food system governance, such as if and how they may facilitate wide-  
43 scale social, environmental, and economic food system reform.

44 To date, researchers have explored the creation, actions, and initial impacts of individual LFPGs  
45 (Mendes, 2008; Blay-Palmer, 2009; Santo *et al.*, 2014; Packer, 2014; Coplen & Cuneo, 2015). Others  
46 have compared the structures, issues, and activities of multiple LFPGs (Lang *et al.*, 2004; Clancy *et al.*,  
47 2007; Schiff, 2008; Scherb *et al.*, 2012; Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015; Halliday, 2015; Horst, 2017),  
48 although with limited evaluation of their collective impact on changing policy or shifting conventional  
49 food governance paradigms (Clark *et al.*, 2015). Scant research exists on how LFPGs connect with one  
50 another, why these trans-local networks emerge, or what achievements and challenges these initiatives  
51 are experiencing. As Blay-Palmer *et al.* (2016) point out, the increasing diversity of cross-sectoral, multi-

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<sup>1</sup> This paper concentrates on LFPGs—which comprise most food policy groups in the UK and 70% in North America; in the latter case, regional (e.g., multi-county, multi-state) (22%), state/provincial (7%), and tribal/First Nations (1%) groups comprise the rest (CLF, 2018).

52 scalar networks arising to facilitate knowledge and resource sharing between local, place-based food  
53 initiatives deserves greater academic attention.

54 Furthermore, little comparative research exists on how LFPGs manifest in different countries.  
55 Hunt (2015) contrasted the US and UK's national food movements, but excluded municipal reforms.  
56 Others have juxtaposed urban food strategies from different countries (Mendes & Sonnino, 2018). Yet,  
57 the evolution, governance, and capacities of networks of LFPGs have not been compared across scales  
58 and geographies. Given increasing spatial and scalar food governance interdependencies (Moragues-  
59 Faus *et al.*, 2017), comparative research may prove useful for exploring how network dynamics evolve in  
60 different contexts and their capacity to alter foodscapes at different levels.

61 This research sought to fill these gaps by exploring the emergence and development of trans-  
62 local food policy networks through analyzing two national initiatives: the Sustainable Food Cities  
63 Network (SFCN) in the UK and Food Policy Networks (FPN) project in the US.<sup>2</sup> The Johns Hopkins Center  
64 for a Livable Future launched FPN in 2013 to build the capacity of new and existing LFPGs that had thus  
65 far been mostly isolated<sup>3</sup> (Clancy, 2012). Meanwhile, British LFPGs have been spurred by national  
66 leadership through SFCN, established in 2011<sup>4</sup> by a coalition of non-governmental organizations  
67 (NGOs)—Soil Association, Sustain, and Food Matters—to help “people and places share challenges,  
68 explore practical solutions, and develop best practices” (SFCN, 2016).

69 In comparing these two initiatives, *we aim to progress our understanding on how complex,*  
70 *interconnected, dynamic, and geographically dispersed networks constitute new forms of food*  
71 *governance and their role in building more sustainable and just food systems.* We first compare three  
72 frameworks that have been used to explore networks—social network analysis, actor-network theory,

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<sup>2</sup> Although it surveys Canadian LFPGs, FPN's efforts concentrate on the US and hence this paper focuses on its role there. Food Secure Canada also hosts teleconferences with provincial/territorial food security networks, though its services are limited.

<sup>3</sup> After the Community Food Security Network (CFSC) disbanded in 2012, FPN formed to continue its local and state food policy work. While it was FPN's pre-cursor, CFSC had relatively meagre resources and staff for this work.

<sup>4</sup> SFCN convened its first five members in 2011 but did not begin formalized support until it secured funding in 2013.

and assemblage theory. This review highlights how the policy assemblages approach provides an innovative and useful lens to explore the mobile, unstable, and relational processes and spatialities of emergent initiatives like LFPGs and their associated trans-local networks. Particular attention is also paid to how these bodies of work conceptualize transformative capacity.

The policy assemblage approach allows us to examine the extent to which LFPGs and their associated trans-local networks function as emergent and evolving social-spatial assemblages of food system knowledge, practices, and infrastructure. Specifically, we asked: How are LFPGs coming together and relating to one another over space and time through the emergence of trans-local networks? How do these trans-local networks shape local food governance ideas, practices, and policies? What transformative capacities do these networks have; could they help scale food system reform *up* from place-based initiatives to regional, national, and international levels and *out* to more municipalities?

We explored these questions through a comparative case study analysis of SFCN and FPN. These two national initiatives were selected because they represent the first trans-local networks of LFPGs; other networks are only in nascent stages (Figure 1). The multi-method qualitative approach employed included participant observation in network member and advisory group meetings; document analysis of websites, member resources, and listserv emails; and 22 semi-structured interviews carried out with key participants from each network from January-August 2016. Interviewees in each country were selected based on purposive sampling. The first interviews were conducted with network practitioners and advisors, in order to strengthen the research's contextual background and solicit recommendations for additional interviewees. Interview transcripts were thematically coded. Discourse analysis of transcripts, meeting notes, and other documents was then conducted. As an FPN staff member and an SFCN academic partner for over three years each, we developed our project with a participant-action research framework. Such positionalities bolstered our aim to balance academic theory and practice through a praxis useful to the networks we were evaluating (Fuller & Kitchen, 2004; Taylor, 2014).

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section two reviews academic literature on networks in agri-food studies and emerging theories about how to analyze their relations, processes, and effects. We critically discuss social network and policy assemblages literature to develop an analytical framework through which to explore the mobile, dynamic, and relational processes and spatialities of emerging multi-level food policy networks. We then present key characteristics of the SFCN and FPN case studies in section three. Subsequently, these cases are examined through three analytical sections. First, we discuss how the fluid, ever-changing characteristics of LFPGs lend these entities to an exploration as assemblages, and the groups which connect them—SFCN and FPN—as assemblages *of* assemblages. Secondly, we address which factors are stabilizing and destabilizing the collective identities of these assemblages. The final analytical section assesses their capacity for transforming the food system. We conclude by discussing how and with what effect LFPGs in the UK and US are assembling and the usefulness of our analytical approach.

## **2. Researching networks and their transformative capacity: From alternative food networks to policy assemblages**

Many disciplines engage with networks, whether as *metaphors* to describe the complex, interconnected, and dynamic systems shaping our social and material worlds or as *analytical tools* to study the structures and relations of such systems (Thompson, 2004; Plastrik *et al.*, 2014). In agri-food studies, networks are commonly explored through the lens of alternative food networks (AFNs), a capacious concept developed in the mid-1990s to describe emerging food provisioning efforts (e.g., farmers markets, community supported agriculture) aimed to (re)connect producers and consumers, (re)spatialize food provenance and quality, and (re)scale food governance processes in ways committed to social justice, ecological sustainability, and economic viability (Kneafsey, 2010). The term network within “AFNs” is used loosely—so much so that others conceptualize the same phenomena as “short

food supply chains” or “local/alternative food systems” (Renting *et al.*, 2012). Agri-food scholars have analyzed AFNs through theoretical and methodological lenses related to political economy, rural sociology, and, less commonly, network theories (Tregear, 2011). The latter two incorporate an analytical network approach of some kind, mainly social network analysis and actor-network theory.

Within rural sociology, some scholars explore how socially-constructed relations shape material and symbolic notions of quality, trust, place, and locality (Sonnino & Marsden, 2006; Goodman & Goodman, 2009). By employing concepts of strong and weak ties, social capital, and embeddedness, these approaches echo **Social Network Analysis (SNA)**, a positivist sociological methodology that maps and calculates patterns of connectivity between actors. Driven by a functionalist ontology, SNA presumes that a network’s structure determines its actions. Hence analysts seek to understand how varying network properties (e.g., frequency and quantity of interactions, node distribution) yield different outcomes (Borgatti *et al.*, 2009). Central to this literature are the concepts of nodes—people or organizations connected by relationships—and networks, defined as “more flexible, flat and non-hierarchical means of exchange and interaction which promise to be more innovative, responsive and dynamic [than traditional relationships] whilst overcoming spatial separation and providing scale economies” (Henry *et al.*, 2004: 839). The appeal of gathering diverse participants in a flexible manner to diffuse knowledge and experience, leverage efficiencies, and create collective value while decentralizing authority has led to the permeation of network theories to the NGO and “social impact” realm. Networks have been identified as particularly suitable to managing unstructured, cross-cutting, and relentless “wicked problems,” such as the issues that LFPGs address (Weber & Khademian, 2008).

Scholars have problematized some key implications of SNA analyses. Firstly, they neglect systemic power relations and non-human actors (e.g., infrastructure, technologies) within and between networks (Henry *et al.*, 2004; Scott, 2015). Their focus on single-level networks overlooks the multiple intersecting scales of networks that exist in reality (Kapucu *et al.*, 2017). Their cross-sectional depictions

of network properties also shroud networks' constantly evolving nature (Kapucu *et al.*, 2017). Finally, by assuming that network actors share values and meanings, such theories obscure the competing interests and discourses inherent in networks' fluid dynamics (Henry *et al.*, 2004).

An alternative conception of networks arose from the application of **actor-network theory (ANT)**. Beyond human-centered social networks, ANT ascribes agency to non-humans, too, and understands power as a practice derived from the relations between heterogeneous network actants (Latour, 2005) rather than a causal property of an actor's position within a network (Wilkinson, 2005). In agri-food studies, it was envisioned as a way to overcome production/consumption dichotomies by theorizing how these are mutually constitutive (Lockie & Kitto, 2000). It also stimulated thinking about contingency and fluidity (Kneafsey, 2010), offering an innovative approach to topological spatial imaginations that blurred distinctions between proximity and action at a distance (Whatmore & Thorne, 1997). For instance, Jarosz (2008: 242) emphasizes that AFNs are "not static objects or sets of relationships," but are constituted out of multiple, contradictory, place-based sociocultural, political, and historical processes and relations. Critics, however, have warned of the potential elusion of socio-economic inequities and political issues under post-structural approaches such as ANT (Moragues-Faus & Marsden, 2017), which may obscure the capacity of initiatives to address the root causes of food insecurity and food system unsustainability.

This critical review of two key approaches to study networks within agri-food literature reveals the importance of network structure (highlighted by SNAs) but also of incorporating elements such as fluidity, co-constitution, and place-based contingency in understanding AFNs. Some of these characteristics have been directly linked to the transformative capacity of such initiatives. Moragues-Faus (2017) has proposed to analyze transformative capacity both by acknowledging the place-based contingency and hybridity of radical change (Jarosz, 2008), and by understanding transformative capacity as a relational political process which implies analyzing ethical practices and repertoires as well



as the connection of these practices to broader processes of change (Busa & Garder, 2015). Specifically, these political claims of AFNs can be discussed using notions of equity, participation, and inclusion; knowledge and reflexivity; and connectivity and autonomy (Moragues-Faus, 2017).

To date, network approaches have been mobilized to study individual AFN initiatives, ignoring their collaborations and connections to wider policy processes (Moragues-Faus and Sonnino, 2012; Levkoe & Wakefield, 2014). This lacuna is significant given the cross-sectoral, multi-scalar networks arising to share knowledge and resources between place-based food initiatives. To fill this gap and overcome aforementioned limitations of network approaches, we turn now to a post-ANT policy assemblages perspective to explore additional analytical tools to investigate how place-based AFNs (specifically LFPGs) collaborate across space and spread their governance ideas.

## 2.1 Policy assemblages, mobilities, and mutations

To overcome confines of traditional network analyses, geographers and urban studies academics have begun employing **assemblage theory**, which originates from dispersed commentaries by Deleuze (often with Guattari, e.g., Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) on how heterogeneous elements come together to establish emergent, irreducible wholes. Assemblage theory explores the roles that these wholes play as well as the processes through which their components become involved and how such processes stabilize or destabilize their identities. By emphasizing the fluctuating interactions of assemblage parts, one studies “how things work and what they produce” rather than trying to “explain, understand, or interpret what an assemblage ‘is’” (Cumming, 2015: 145; 141). More than a descriptive term, assemblage theory is a style of knowledge production, an approach to exploring and representing the temporality, spatiality, fragility, multiplicity, and potentiality of composite relations and processes (Anderson & McFarlane, 2011).

Although sharing many conventions with ANT, assemblage applications (e.g., McFarlane, 2009; Healey, 2013) often assume more structural and human-centered perspectives than ANT/Latoureaun ones (Farías, 2011). This difference arises because, while the Deleuzian approach invites the researcher to diverge from conventional discursive human-centered methods (Coleman & Ringrose 2013; Cumming, 2015), some employ assemblages as a specific type of research object rather than methodological orientation (Brenner *et al.*, 2011; Foroughmand Araabi, 2014).

In assemblage thinking, the researcher also assumes a fundamentally spatial analytical foundation which challenges traditional conceptions of scale (McCann & Ward, 2013). Since “assemblages can be component parts of other assemblages,” assemblage theory provides “a unique way of... linking the micro- and macro-levels of social reality...whereby larger entities emerged from the assembly of smaller ones” in a complex web of multiple, overlapping systems at intersecting scales (DeLanda, 2006: 17). McFarlane (2009), for instance, deliberately blurs scalar distinctions between local and global with the term “translocal” to describe interconnected social movements.

One relevant application of assemblage theory to studying food policy groups is the “policy assemblage, mobilities, and mutations approach,” which explores “how, why, where and with what effects policies are mobilized, circulated, learned, reformulated and reassembled” (McCann & Ward, 2013: 3). This framework differs from conventional ways of understanding and analyzing how governance practices travel and the mechanisms by which we characterize them (i.e. networks). While traditional policy transfer research supposes a linear, rational flow of fixed policy ideas from one place to another, this approach appreciates policymaking as a complex, multilateral process in which ideas are spread and transformed through assemblages, shaped by a matrix of actants from near and far away (Healey, 2013).

Policy assemblages, mobilities, and mutations scholars thus differentiate their approach from network and policy transfer ones. McFarlane (2009), for instance, uses “translocal assemblages” instead

of “networks” to explore social movements comprised of place-based actors exchanging ideas, knowledge, and resources across sites. He argues that trans-local assemblages are more than just nodes between sites because of the specific histories and labor<sup>5</sup> required to produce them. Indeed, the transformative capacity of assemblages is linked to their capacity of being innovative and productive, “producing a new reality by making numerous and unexpected connections” (Livesey, 2010: 19).

Ultimately, while assemblages share similarities with network conceptions—and some scholars try to employ them concurrently (Levkoe & Wakefield, 2014)—fundamental ontological, epistemological, and methodological divides remain that yield different depictions and analyses of the same “entity.” To address current gaps in the analysis of LFPGs and their networks, we propose in this paper a novel approach in agri-food studies—an analytical framework based on assemblage theory—that offers new modes of engagement and associated capacities for action (Kennedy *et al.*, 2013). Specifically, we explore how and why trans-local food policy assemblages develop, first by characterizing their emergent nature, fluid interactions, and disruption of spatial and scalar divides. Secondly, we unpack the stabilizing and destabilizing forces operating within these assemblages. Finally, we relate these trans-local assemblages’ properties and dynamics to their potential transformative capacity by focusing on the place-based hybridity of change and ethical practice deliberation appreciated in AFN approaches, as well as through assemblage notions of novelty.

[Figure 1]

### **3. Trans-local food policy networks: The US Food Policy Networks project and UK Sustainable Food Cities Network**

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<sup>5</sup> Conventional network descriptions emphasize the “self-organising nature of complex networks and their essential endogenous characters” (Thompson, 2004: 414).

Local food policy groups have been emerging in industrialized countries, most frequently in the US (284), UK (55), Canada (52) (Figure 1). Although their organizational structures and relationships with government vary, LFPGs share similar goals of fostering sustainable and just food systems. Many work on changing policy and programs to improve healthy food access, sustainable food procurement, food waste reduction and recovery, agricultural land use, the local food economy, and public food systems knowledge (CLF, 2018; SFCN, 2018). While comparative perspectives can provide valuable insights to places facing similar challenges and potentially reduce duplicative work (or failures), the political and spatial dimensions embedded in local processes must be considered. Thus, we first discuss differences in US and UK political, geographical, and sociocultural contexts influencing LFPGs before elaborating on the organizational characteristics and capacities of the trans-local efforts connecting them.

### 3.1 Emergence of local food policy groups in the US and UK

The rise and reception of LFPGs have been shaped by the national contexts in which they have arisen. Over the past few decades, national partisan gridlocks and the devolution of powers to localities have prompted municipalities to lead transformative social, economic, and environmental change (Katz & Bradley, 2013). Sheingate (2015) explored this theme in the US by considering how the unravelling federal food/agricultural policy regime—exemplified by the 2014 Farm Bill<sup>6</sup> debacle—has created space for alternative local food governance innovations. Similar themes have permeated to British society, as one citizen stated, “cities are doing things for themselves because of the vacuum created by the fact that central government isn’t” (Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015:1566). The UK and US municipal food movements differ, however, in local governments’ autonomy in policy and programmatic decisions, funding landscapes, and stakeholder participation priorities (Morgan & Santo, 2018).

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<sup>6</sup> The Farm Bill is an omnibus piece of food and agriculture legislation, negotiated every five years, covering food assistance benefits, farm subsidies and loans, conservation, energy, trade, and rural development. The last Farm Bill authorized spending for 2014-2018, and the 2018 reauthorization process is underway.

While the devolution of powers to Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales and later to English city-regions echoes American devolution narratives, UK local governments have relatively little policymaking authority (Morgan & Sonnino, 2010). New city-region governance structures have been chiefly driven by central government rather than genuine devolution (Kneafsey, 2010). That said, the decentralization of the National Health Services to local authorities has proven instrumental to including a health perspective in UK LFPGs; public health plays a key role in establishing, planning, and delivering local food strategies (King, 2017). The supremacy of London-based central government power must also be considered in context of the UK's economic, political, and sociocultural "North-South divide," in which the brunt of large-scale deindustrialization was felt most seriously by Northern England, Wales, Scotland, while post-industrial economic growth disproportionately benefited Southeast England (Baker & Billinge, 2004). While regional geographies are complex, fluid, and ambiguous, material disparities exist, and these affect public spatial imaginaries, material conditions, and political realities (*ibid*).

Deep geographical divisions in the US also affect local political, economic, and cultural experiences. Partisan preferences vary dramatically between urban, suburban, and rural areas, the former of which have recently swung more politically and socially progressive and the latter of which have bent more politically and socially conservative (Greenblatt, 2014; Parker *et al.*, 2018). The more densely populated East and West Coasts are thus often considered liberal strongholds, along with metropolitan areas in the country's more central states. As rural areas have lost population, and residents have felt marginalized and economically distressed as a consequence of globalization and federal regulations, a resentment for "disconnected" urban elites has become a common political narrative (Hanson, 2017; Jordan & Sullivan, 2018). With the country's deep geographical and political polarization—furthered by the 2016 presidential election (Johnston *et al.*, 2017)—inhibiting much consensus at the federal level, the relatively high amount of Constitutionally-granted autonomy that

state governments (and in different amounts, local governments) maintain allows for most of the public policy that happens in the country (Moncrief & Squire, 2017).

The growth of LFPGs have been financially sustained by different sectors. In the US, while early support came from some federal government programs (Hunt, 2015:192-200), LFPGs are more often funded by (chiefly health-focused) private foundations—the most common funding source after in-kind donations (CLF, 2018). Meanwhile, UK public opinion has traditionally favored a strong welfare state over philanthropy<sup>7</sup> (Wright, 2001). Most funding for local food systems projects has come from EU rural development grants, government agencies (mostly public health-affiliated), and Lottery funds, though austerity cuts and Brexit threaten these sources (Halliday, 2015; Hunt, 2015), and consequently prompt community and voluntary action as an alternative (Alcock *et al.*, 2012). The presence of foundations to fill in these gaps has been increasing, but they are scarce compared to the US (Daly, 2008; Leat, 2006). Thus, few dedicated food systems funders exist in the UK (Hunt, 2015), with the exception of one national foundation, Esmée Fairbairn, which funded SFCN (and indirectly LFPGs) in 2013 and 2016.

US food movement narratives and priorities have also been heavily influenced by literature and activism around structural inequities in the food system (Guel *et al.*, 2016). Despite rhetorical aims to alleviate social injustices, the alternative food movement has been critiqued for re-producing them through its predominantly white, middle-class membership (Guthman, 2008; Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). LFPGs have been implicated in such critiques, thus diverse representation is a common issue many address (McCullagh & Santo, 2014; Day Farnsworth, 2017). In contrast, UK food movement culture does not appreciably emphasize the inclusion or empowerment of people of diverse races, classes, genders, and ages. Little academic literature concentrating on racial and social inequities in the food movement

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<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the NGO sector in the UK has progressively been recognized as a plank for economic and social development and currently constitutes a strategic unit to deliver public services and contribute to policy development (Alcock *et al.*, 2012).

comes from British authors.<sup>8</sup> Hunt (2015:178) confirmed this observation in practice, finding in over two decades of comparative analysis that “discussions of social equality were less visible in the English food movement than in the American movement.” Similarly, Halliday (2015:206) noted in her case study of five English LFPGs that the groups were “more focused on [diverse] organizational or professional representation than lay community members” of lower incomes or of color, as in the US. These differences influence how actors within LFPG frame inclusivity and participation, as well as their priorities for food system reform.

### 3.2 The rise of trans-local food policy networks

Both the US and UK have been pioneers in developing LFPGs. In recent years, national and international networks have also developed to connect these local, place-based initiatives in food governance and policy; FPN and SFCN represent the oldest such examples. As Table 1 demonstrates, they share similar objectives of facilitating peer-to-peer learning, building LFPG capacity, supporting research and evaluation, and potentially enabling collaborative action. However, SFCN devotes more time and resources to hosting national conferences and collective action campaigns, while FPN expends more effort on organizational development for LFPGs. In the following sections, we analyze how these characteristics contribute to the dynamic nature, stabilizing and destabilizing forces, and transformative capacity of LFPGs and their connecting networks.

[Table 1]

## **4. The dynamic and emergent nature of food policy networks**

LFPGs and the trans-local networks connecting them are commonly depicted as a part of a growing phenomenon of organized local/regional entities of food policy actors (see Figure 1). While this

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<sup>8</sup> Goodman (2004:13) and Morgan *et al.* (2007:190) allude to such challenges, but do not focus on them as much US scholarship does.

“growth” is compelling, it obfuscates the dynamic composition, temporality, and fluidity of these groups and networks as anticipated by assemblage thinking. Below we further explore the emergent properties of these networks, the types of interactions in which they engage, and their spatial configurations in order to unpack how food policy assemblages develop and connect to one another.

#### 4.1 Emergence and disappearance of LFPGs

Personal experience updating the FPN directory through administering its annual census demonstrated the difficulties of characterizing the “existence” of LFPGs. Firstly, how does one demarcate a group’s formation? When initiators first discuss the idea? When they gather a larger community of stakeholders? When they finalize terms of reference/bylaws? Establishment processes can take several years, making the documentation of LFPGs an ambiguous task. Second, the census counts fluctuate significantly, as LFPGs frequently dissolve and (occasionally) reassemble.<sup>9</sup> This flux is lost in the appearance of an upward trend, which imparts an impression of an increasing institutionalization or norm of LFPGs but overlooks their internal instability. These dynamics are also rarely discussed in analyses. With few exceptions (Coplen & Cuneo, 2015; Cuy Castellanos *et al.*, 2017), most studies concentrate on success stories. As Jacobs (2012: 419) discusses, “sites of failure, absence and mutation are significant empirical instances of differentiation” and deserve exploration, too. This, however, requires acknowledgment of LFPGs’ unstable and transitory nature.

The (non)existence of LFPGs only scratches the surface of their dynamic nature. Even when groups do not officially dissolve, they often undergo significant restructuring. Moreover, LFPGs may have varying “memberships” inherently built into their structure, as an informant states:

*“I use ‘network’ loosely. We have a governance group, but no official membership” (FPN-academic advisor).*

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<sup>9</sup> On average, 19 LFPGs were removed from FPN’s directory each year from 2013-17 while 30 entered a period of hiatus or questionable status (e.g., outdated webpage, unresponsive); some re-emerged, as evident by 12 currently active councils that were inactive/dissolved for several years. As of 08/2018, another 120 remain inactive.



Many LFPGs' memberships consist of an extensive listserv of interested citizens and organizational representatives, a smaller group which attends some meetings, an even smaller group which comes to most meetings and participates in working groups, and sometimes paid staff to organize daily logistics.

Some viewed the loose and fluctuating membership of LFPGs as an impediment to influencing policy change or embedding programmatic sustainability. Without an organized structure and consistent membership, LFPGs may struggle to develop long-term relationships internally and externally or to compose an advocacy voice. Others, however, accentuate the flexibility it provides. For instance, LFPGs can adapt their actions to relevant issues for policymakers, funders, or the public. It also builds in resilience to survive changes in political or economic support:

*"We kept re-shuffling ourselves... so we could take a hit and be resilient, a big goal after the governor took away the [first] council. Then we thought 'we'll get this legislated to live forever' and that didn't work. So we said, 'why aren't we thinking about this as less rigid, institutional and more living up to what we can in the moment?'"* (FPN-academic advisor).

To a lesser extent, the trans-local networks of LFPGs also have a dynamic nature. Although staffed and affiliated within NGO or academic institutions, their governance and organization structures continually evolve, especially as both initiated re-structuring processes in summer 2016. The SFCN's second round of funding radically changed their relationships with member groups (Table 1). Interviewees presumed that by 2019, the network would be self-sufficient by relying further on city resources and developing a distributed leadership.

Meanwhile, FPN's creation came as a consequence of the dissolution of another organization, the CFSC (Footnote 3). Since assuming maintenance of CFSC's listserv and resources in 2012, FPN leadership has been exploring how to expand and amplify the support available for LFPGs. The July 2016 advisory committee meeting was the first time advisors had met in person to discuss FPN's mission and objectives; accordingly, FPN's long-term role continues evolving.

As Table 1 shows, SFCN's membership is considerably more structured than FPN's. Groups must apply to become affiliates, which requires LFPGs to demonstrate they have assembled a cross-sector partnership of food system stakeholders to create and implement an action plan that addresses six specific issue areas. In contrast, like many LFPGs, there is no official FPN "membership." Instead, FPN considers its primary audience the 284 known LFPGs in the US. However, its membership could also be considered its 1,460 listserv subscribers, or even all those who have attended a presentation or training by FPN staff. The indeterminate permanency and varying levels of affiliation and flexibility within the initiatives under study impact their notions of identity and collective capacities.

## [Figure 2]

### 4.2 Fluid interactions

The relatively delimited official compositions of LFPGs and the networks which connect them (Figure 2) also cloud the complex interactions between these initiatives and others beyond their immediate "memberships." Understanding their cross-sectoral and cross-scalar interactions is crucial to understanding the role these assemblages play, given that Deleuzian approaches emphasize "what [a body] is capable of, and in what ways its relations with other bodies diminish or enhance those capacities" (Hickey-Moody & Malins, 2007: 3). Informants highlighted how their relations with other organizations and networks influenced their ability to affect change beyond their local situations. Each network they engaged with offered certain attributes, from providing broad frameworks in which to situate their work (e.g., FPN, SFCN) to connecting actors working within similar organizational structures (e.g., Sustainability Directors Network), geographic areas (e.g., Welsh Food and Drink Industry Board), funding constraints (e.g., recipients of certain grants), or topic areas (e.g., UK Food Poverty Alliance, Center for Good Food Purchasing network).

These beyond-member relationships were considered fundamental—not just tangential—elements of LFPGs' work, as these connections bolstered their larger-scale impact. For instance, one

403 interviewee discussed her observation that the network she coordinated was not just a convener of  
404 LFPGs in the state, but also a place for other state food-related networks (e.g., Farm-to-School, food  
405 hubs, sustainable agriculture networks) to interact:

406 *“Why not take all these other existing networks and use their infrastructure to do what we want*  
407 *to do?”* (FPN-academic advisor).  
408

409 An SFCN staff person echoed similar sentiments, discussing the importance of engaging beyond the  
410 network’s membership:

411 *“[SFCN’s] about finding that common ground with other organizations and networks throughout*  
412 *the UK”* (SFCN-staff).  
413

414 Interviewees also brought up the importance of not overlooking other unaffiliated actors:

415 *“a lot of people do really good work who aren’t on the council and don’t really relate to it... There*  
416 *are formal structures but also all these informal elements supporting it”* (FPN-LFPG1).  
417

418 These quotes highlight the suitability of assemblage thinking to understand the large messy webs of  
419 interconnected, multiplicitous, and dynamic organizations, networks, and infrastructure in which LFPGs  
420 are embedded. Figure 3 attempts to convey this more complicated reality.

421  
422 [Figure 3]  
423

#### 424 4.3 Disrupting spatial divides

425 The diversity of relations established by LFPGs and associated national networks demonstrates  
426 how these entities are not confined to single scales or territories, although they are commonly  
427 conceived of (e.g., names, jurisdiction boundaries) and analyzed within such confines. In fact, LFPGs may  
428 be considered one mechanism through which urban-rural and local-global divides are being blurred. For  
429 example, LFPGs in the US are organized within county as well as city institutions, and in the UK campaign  
430 for national reforms on issues that affect both urban and rural areas such as food poverty.

431 SFCN and FPN are also instigating new socio-spatial topological relations blurring distinctions  
432 between local, regional, national, and global, therefore embodying relational theories of space that

transcend conventional scalar imaginaries (Amin, 2004; Massey, 2005). For instance, aided by the national network infrastructure connecting them, LFPGs have begun collaborating on multi-scalar issues. One US LFPG interviewee discussed how she met representatives from a nearby city's LFPG when attending a training hosted by FPN. They have since formed an urban agriculture working group to reform state policies that constrain the work of local urban producers.

Meanwhile, SFCN explicitly facilitates annual (opt-in) campaigns for collective action: the first related to shifting seafood procurement, the second to addressing food poverty, the third to reducing sugar consumption, and the fourth to promoting vegetable consumption. Following observations that LFPGs around the country were experiencing similar challenges, SFCN began supporting collaboration to develop and advance a common agenda unlocking municipal and national policy constraints. This aim became particularly relevant in the food poverty campaign. As SFCN staff convened LFPGs on the topic, they realized the need to engage other networks/organizations working on food poverty, which prompted the creation of the UK Food Poverty Alliance. As one informant described:

*"...we're all shouting about the same issue, so why not shout together to make a big difference instead of us pursuing our little priority and them pursuing theirs?" (SFCN-staff).*

Following this realization, SFCN developed, in consultation with its members, a food poverty declaration that has been signed by 30 cities. The declaration calls on local and national governments to act on different fronts, including reviewing benefit sanctions and welfare reform implementation and supporting living wages. UK LFPGs have thus assembled with other entities to generate collective capacity to act at different policy levels. Some thought SFCN could do even more:

*"[SFCN] could have a bigger voice... can they start getting some pushes with agricultural ministers in the devolved nations, other ministers that we should be influencing?" (SFCN-LFPG1).*

Multi-scalar advocacy and collective action has been pursued less deliberately by FPN, which at this point has not facilitated a specific campaign. It has, however, created resources and shared information on its listserv intended to inspire LFPGs to understand how they relate to—and could

potentially impact—federal policies and programs (e.g., Affordable Care Act, Child Nutrition Reauthorization) and international issues (e.g., free trade agreements). Nevertheless, all US LFPGs, when discussing how they thought FPN could be improved, raised what they viewed as an untapped potential for collective action. The imminent 2018 Farm Bill process,<sup>10</sup> in particular, fostered new conversations:

*“I want not just talking about how to do local policy, but how does that translate into collaborative work on national urban food policy?... [such as] pushing for Farm Bill support for urban ag, increased farm to school work, highlighting racial imbalances, access to resources...”* (FPN-LFPG3).

While LFPG interviewees were eager to discuss potential cross-scalar collaboration, several limitations—in the capacity of the trans-local networks and LFPGs themselves—were also identified. Firstly, trans-local network engagement with processes such as Farm Bill or Brexit discussions requires significant time and resources, especially of network staff, and may have limited returns compared to less politically contentious and cumbersome action at local and regional levels. Second, most LFPGs, with their relatively inexperienced and fluctuating memberships, might be unprepared to work on national or international issues that require long-term commitments and organizational and political sophistication. Third, logistical and organizational realities, such as how government-embedded LFPGs cannot lobby on political issues, could also limit LFPGs’ capacity to engage at higher levels. Fourth, the political process is fundamentally defined by scalar separations of political jurisdictions; obstructing it requires convincing politicians to collaborate beyond their purviews in unprecedented ways. Lastly, nearly all interviewees expressed how their advocacy roles were limited due to struggles in identifying a common, shared platform among LFPG members—let alone among other LFPGs—to advocate for at any level. In sum, the transitory nature and dynamic relations within and beyond LFPGs and SFCN/FPN offer both opportunities for transcending traditional spatial imaginaries, as well as challenges in doing so when constrained by political, economic, and temporal realities.

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<sup>10</sup> Since the interviews were conducted in 2016, FPN launched its first attempt to address the Farm Bill through a webinar series beginning in fall 2017.

## 5. Knitting and dissolving assemblages: Stabilizing and destabilizing forces

The section above discussed the convergence of LFPG actors across scales and sites, and highlighted how these assemblages can create productive connections and act as an entity. In this section, we examine which factors stabilize and destabilize these networks in order to understand the different dynamics at play in the creation and re-creation of trans-local food policy assemblages.

### 5.1 Stabilizing forces

Interviewees emphasized the appeals of participating in LFPGs and SFCN/FPN, including the legitimacy these groups provided to their efforts, reduced feelings of isolation, and capacity to bring diverse voices together to deliberate and identify collective goals. The SFCN and FPN proved important to many interviewees in terms of collective identity benefits. LFPG members valued these trans-local networks for situating their efforts within the larger national context when speaking to decision-makers or the public, and also for overcoming interpersonal political dynamics that LFPGs may face. For FPN members, the annual census (and associated map and chart, e.g., Figure 1) depicting the rise of LFPGs was especially noted:

*“This body of work around the country... It’s really helped us gain legitimacy in terms of who we are locally and the connections we have beyond our region” (FPN-LFPG2).*

The SFCN, with its more filtered membership process, comes with an even more distinguished identity than FPN, including common (optional) branding. SFCN interviewees also valued “outsider legitimacy,” noting how its official advocacy campaigns provided credibility for groups attempting to persuade or motivate decentralized health institutions and government to act:

*“[SFCN] is giving credibility to [our] partnership...I wouldn’t have gotten anywhere near that level of success [on the sustainable fish campaign] if doing it on my own” (SFCN-LFPG1).*

The differential capacity of SFCN for cross-scalar collective action was also widely acknowledged:

512 *"A lot of work was happening before SFCN set up. But... now you're part of a bigger picture, can*  
513 *speak with a bigger voice..."* (SFCN-practitioner advisor).

514  
515 Along this line, the SFCN award works as an ordering device to evaluate and celebrate food  
516 policy activity across the UK under a common framework. The SFCN confers three tiers of awards  
517 (bronze, silver, gold) to celebrate progress of LFPGs on various health and sustainability issues. A few  
518 LFPG interviewees discussed how they valued the award process for credibility reasons:

519 *"I'm not a big fan of awards... feels a wee bit superficial. However, at the Liverpool conference*  
520 *this year, I saw the awards given out to the three cities. Belfast had brought along a deputy*  
521 *leader. And I noticed the... quite good PR around [Bristol's] award. So I see advantages at a*  
522 *political level to get these awards."* (SFCN-LFPG2)

523  
524 Others valued the opportunities the SFCN award process provided for LFPG members to more closely  
525 identify as a local group and gain motivation to advance a common agenda:

526 *"Doing the work towards getting the Bronze Award really brought the partnership together...*  
527 *People had to tell me what they were doing and... perhaps work together."* (SFCN-LFPG1).

528  
529 Thus, the FPN census and SFCN branding, national campaigns, and award system all represent  
530 synthesizing tools that help LFPGs, as components of the larger FPN/SFCN assemblages, express their  
531 common identity to pursue collective goals.

## 532 533 5.2 Destabilizing forces

534 The momentary and long-term collective identity of these groups is *"not neat and tidy as it*  
535 *sounds,"* as one interviewee explained (FPN-LFPG2). Numerous debates exist both within LFPGs and the  
536 trans-local networks connecting them over how to characterize their fundamental purpose—and hence  
537 how to name them and which issues to address—and how to go about resolving these contentions.  
538 These issues could be considered destabilizing forces, given their potential to divide members and  
539 undermine LFPGs' potential progress.

540 For many LFPGs, fundamental questions have surfaced around establishing objectives. For  
541 instance, interviewees discussed how most LFPGs have pursued low-hanging fruits, "feel-good things"

542 (FPN-LFGP1) like farmers markets and healthy eating initiatives instead of more contentious, but also  
543 perhaps more transformative food system issues such as land ownership reform, labor rights,  
544 commodity subsidies, dietary recommendations, or Brexit. Practitioners expressed concerns about how  
545 collective values and decision-making processes within and between LFGPs have not been determined.  
546 One coordinator discussed such dilemmas since the recent proliferation of LFGPs in her state:

547 *"We're all councils built around this model, but we don't actually know that we're in concert on*  
548 *particular issues. We don't have a shared platform that we're working on locally, then*  
549 *advocating for at the state level. That's where I see potential... but that could be potentially*  
550 *contentious, too. Our state has a local food and farm task force. And they're like, 'this local food,*  
551 *healthy eating stuff is nice, but don't mess with big ag'... There's this impetus to network, but*  
552 *maybe without the harder discussions of the actual worldview or end goal. But maybe the*  
553 *council is about creating a space for those conversations"* (FPN-LFGP1).

554  
555 Another coordinator echoed similar thoughts when describing how the LFGP, as a loose association of  
556 interested people/organizations, has limited ability to engage with contentious but essential topics:

557 *"We've been just synching up our work... but how do we actually take a position on something?...*  
558 *We updated the urban ag zoning code, a real success. [But] that's non-controversial... [When]*  
559 *there was paid sick leave legislation in the city, it was difficult because we count amongst our*  
560 *membership some restaurants that were opposing the bill. With no clear decision-making*  
561 *structure, we weren't able to make any advance beyond education, information sharing"* (FPN-  
562 LFGP2).

563  
564 The competing discourses amongst LFGP members regarding what problems they seek to  
565 address and how to address them underscore more fundamental issues among LFGPs: what is their  
566 actual purpose or their strategy to transform food systems? Different answers entail different actions  
567 and member compositions. For instance, debate exists over what constitutes a diversity of stakeholders.  
568 Some view it as a cross-sectoral array of organizational representatives and decision-makers ("grass-  
569 tops"), whereas others emphasize grassroots community engagement. Some aim to connect  
570 local/sustainable food advocates with congruent underlying values, while others urge the inclusion of  
571 "conventional" stakeholders to achieve more widespread (though maybe less progressive) change. The  
572 radical versus reformist potential of LFGPs has been debated for years (Holt-Giménez & Wang, 2011;



Packer, 2014), but these opposing approaches create divisions within LFPGs and within the trans-local networks connecting them, threatening their cohesiveness and capacity for collective action.

Such contestations were particularly notable in US LFPGs and FPN. Some LFPGs emphasized that their focus was on engaging the community members most impacted by food poverty and lack of access to healthy food—mostly lower-income residents and people of color. This often meant changing the name and nature of the LFPG, shifting from policy to more educational and programmatic initiatives:

*“FPN and other [LFPGs]...are so wedded to saying it’s food policy when the average person’s...super turned-off by that terminology...when [the former LFPG leadership] were doing ‘food policy listening sessions,’ they had a self-selected group of rich white people. But when I do ‘Food Turnup’ events, I get lots of different people...”* (FPN-practitioner advisor).

In one conservative Midwestern state, diverse inclusion meant engaging with not just small organic producers but also conventional ones who comprise most nearby producers. This steered the LFPG towards less contentious efforts. It also compelled them to frame themselves differently:

*“there’s a lot of food policy councils here, but most of them are ‘food and farm coalitions’ because policy is a bad word in most of [this state]”* (FPN-LFPG1).

In contrast, FPN staff thought that a key purpose of LFPGs (and FPN supporting them) was explicitly to help the public better understand and engage in policy and governance processes:

*“Do people understand how their government works? Do they know how to find out who to talk to in a particular department to get issues worked out? It’s not a legislative act in most cases... a big part of [FPN’s] role is educating people about the process”* (FPN-staff).

Other members of the FPN advisory committee somewhat eschewed community engagement and civic education altogether, given that more progress could be achieved (and more quickly) to improve food security and sustainability outcomes by coordinating a few “grass-tops” individuals. FPN leadership disagreements about the inherent purpose of LFPGs fed into larger questions at the advisory meeting—and echoed by LFPG members—about the fundamental purpose of FPN itself. Informants pondered the extent to which FPN was for information sharing, mentoring, and capacity building of individual LFPGs, or for collective action at national or international levels.

Debates over the inherent purposes of LFPGs, and the networks supporting them, did not appear to be as concerning to SFCN affiliates. As one interviewee described, most UK LFPGs are called food partnerships because local authorities do not have as many policy powers as their US counterparts. It could also partly be due to the fact that SFCN's established issue areas and application direct groups towards having similar foci and membership compositions.

Ultimately, LFPGs are far from homogeneous. On the one hand, LFPG's different names, terminologies, and objectives demonstrated the modifications occurring as these new food governance practices and policies travel to places with specific socio-cultural norms and political realities. On the other hand, they raised underlying doubts about whether LFPGs within individual countries and between the UK and US can even be categorized as part of the same phenomenon:

*"They are very different. [LFPGs] in America and Canada do some of what food partnerships do here... but it's largely dependent on what and how the structure is set up, what level of funding it has, how it's integrated into the local authority" (SFCN-practitioner advisor).*

Fundamental questions remain about whether LFPGs and the networks connecting them share similar enough purposes to identify as part of the same movement, within and across countries. Different forms of organizational infrastructure may be needed if they aim to scale up their policy action.

## **6. Analyzing the transformative capacity of trans-local assemblages**

The sections above highlighted the hybridity of LFPGs and their networks, revealing their distinct alignment with alternative but also conventional food groups. These characteristics elicit questions around their effectiveness for structural reform. We will now assess the potential transformative capacity of trans-local networks of LFPGs from the place-based hybridity of change and ethical practice deliberation appreciated in AFN approaches, as well as through assemblage notions of novelty.

Following AFNs' conceptualization of transformative capacity, we are witnessing how LFPGs are supporting place-based transitions to sustainable food systems through more participative and inclusive

forms of food governance. Of particular importance is the social, physical, and digital infrastructure that supports trans-local food movements by creating avenues for cities to connect and share place-based knowledge. Facilitators of both networks emphasized how such infrastructure helps cities interact with peers, and helps to sustain the networks long-term. As one SFCN staff member explained:

*“You can formally construct opportunities [like conferences]... but that is resource intense. You really want some kind of spontaneous connecting between cities themselves”* (SFCN-staff).

The networks have also been critical components in the spread of LFPGs to new municipalities.

Nearly all informants mentioned how they had attended a training session facilitated by SFCN or FPN staff, which provided necessary support, and sometimes the impetus, to launch their LFPG:

*“We would never have done it if it wasn’t for [SFCN]”* (SFCN-LFPG4).

This analysis of food policy groups revealed current gaps in how ethical repertoires are constructed—a key aspect to understanding these initiatives’ transformative capacities—particularly around notions of *connectivity* (e.g., defining purpose, public framing) and *diversity* when working across sectors, interests, and scales. On the one hand, LFPGs, and particularly their national umbrella networks, are actively engaging with broader processes of social change. These relational political processes have been particularly notable in how SFCN and FPN have begun to influence the narratives of decision-makers and, in an inchoate way, funders. By demonstrating and supporting the spread of LFPGs, they have helped normalize the integration of food into municipal governments’ agendas:

*“[SFCN’s] creating a food path in municipal politics... there was no mandate, no tradition of talking about food... by making food visible, it allows us to view and value it in different ways. That’s why it’s one of, if not the most, important innovation in the UK sustainable food movement in the last 20 years”* (SFCN-academic advisor).

Since funding was universally described as a core difficulty for LFPGs, some emphasized that FPN and SFCN could play a larger role in shaping funder priorities to amplify and expand the work of LFPGs. For instance, FPN could influence how funders distribute resources, given that many food system problems stem from inequitable resource allocation:

657           *"A lot [of foundation money] goes through... white-led organizations who hand out resources to*  
658           *people of color, or work in communities of color... [FPN should] call [foundations] out as a more*  
659           *neutral national-level organization for the burden to be on"* (FPN-LFPG3).  
660

661           On the other hand, FPN and SFCN are also prompting reflexivity in local food governance  
662           practices. For example, interviewees in both countries discussed the predominance of funding for LFPGs  
663           from the public health sector. While this demonstrates LFPGs' flexibility to adapt to current political and  
664           funding climates, it could be narrowing their scope of work:

665           *"A substantial part [of the food movement] was focused on the environment, sustainable ag,*  
666           *farmers and workers. In the last census [of LFPGs], you don't see [anyone addressing] those*  
667           *issues...we've shifted to healthy food access. The attention to chronic disease, obesity's a double-*  
668           *edged sword... this shift toward where the funding's coming from...I'd ask, are we [FPN] taking a*  
669           *systems perspective as a network?"* (FPN-academic advisor).  
670

671           Another example comes from discussions about the demographic composition of LFPGs.  
672           Observations of SFCN listserv discussions, online resources, and meetings suggested that the priority of  
673           engaging community members from diverse classes and races was off the radar. Compared to the US,  
674           where every single interviewee brought up the issue of meaningful community engagement, diversity (if  
675           mentioned) in UK LFPGs entailed achieving diverse sectoral representation (a requirement to join SFCN).  
676           Led by experienced NGOs, SFCN has successfully institutionalized the importance of cross-sectoral  
677           partnerships and collaborative development of local food policies, but has not emphasized the larger  
678           social and racial justice themes prominent in US narratives. By revealing these trends, the trans-local  
679           networks can play a role in fostering more holistic outlooks in LFPGs' policy and programmatic priorities.

680           That said, the level of *connectivity* with actors addressing structural causes of food insecurity  
681           and inequity, and the inclusion of *diverse* voices, varies greatly among LFPGs and remains untapped by  
682           the national assemblages. For example, some interviewees pointed out how FPN trainings cater to  
683           white, middle class norms, threatening its ability to effectively support LFPG members from different  
684           sociocultural and political backgrounds.

685           These disparities also have a spatial dimension. In the US, informants discussed the low amount  
686 of resources, trainings, and technical assistance for LFPGs outside of the East and West Coasts and a few  
687 Midwest states, reproducing the wider political economy of the country. Many mentioned how most  
688 LFPG work has focused on urban areas, thus rural areas might not see the relevance of creating LFPGs or  
689 have as many resources to do so.

690           In the UK, regional geographical differences between the North and South predominated  
691 concerns about how SFCN may disproportionately cater its resources. One interviewee discussed how  
692 SFCN's broad membership enticed its political leadership to join:

693           *"[Our] Council really likes that other [SFCN flagship cities] are gritty Northern, ex-industrial towns*  
694 *like Liverpool and Newcastle. If the other cities had all been Bristols, Baths, and Brightons, it*  
695 *wouldn't have been all that excited about the network"* (SFCN-LFPG3).

696           Nevertheless, while SFCN membership includes LFPGs from different regions and political and  
697 economic contexts (it intentionally funded flagship cities outside of Southern England), it notably has  
698 conferred SFCN awards to almost all<sup>11</sup> Southern English cities. Some attendees at SFCN's 2016  
699 conference expressed frustration that Northern LFPGs, who face more barriers to integrated food  
700 system reform and are working from different baselines of citizen interest and resources, were not  
701 recognized, nor were the "best practices" awarded relevant to their contexts.

702           Informants also raised topics that they thought were critical to achieving transformative food  
703 system reform but were missing from FPN and SFCN narratives and resources, including food worker  
704 labor relations, engagement with businesses, dietary shifts (e.g., away from red meat), and non-food  
705 issues underlying food ones. For instance, as one LFPG coordinator described:

706           *"Everyone thinks about subsidies, food deserts, food stamps, school lunch but where local*  
707 *governments exert their influence is longer-term, more systems-shifting stuff. Like public finance,*  
708 *structures around bonding and development incentives, land preservation, land acquisition for*  
709 *beginning farmers, maybe even affordable housing... because it's easier to skip a few meals than*  
710 *a housing or rental payment. That issue-bridging in more substantial ways would be really*  
711 *helpful."* (FPN-LFPG1)  
712

---

<sup>11</sup> The only exceptions to the nine awards given in 2015-6 were Cardiff and Belfast.

713  
714 Thus, while the trans-local networks are stimulating relational political processes around connectivity  
715 and diversity, further and deeper opportunities to advance social change remain.

716 An assemblage conceptualization of transformative capacity, which avoids the normative tone  
717 of AFN literature, provides another perspective by highlighting how LFPGs are constantly generating  
718 new connections, activities, infrastructure, and knowledge with a high capacity to recombine these in  
719 different ways, and by downplaying whether this flexibility elicits disappearance relatively quickly. Their  
720 dynamic nature and malleability of issues addressed allow LFPGs to build alliances and navigate political  
721 and economic changes. However, they may also restrict groups' abilities to institutionalize or advocate  
722 for change at higher levels. The assemblage perspective of transformative capacity unveils that SFCN  
723 and FPN capitalize in this nebula of activity to pursue collective goals and push for wider food system  
724 reform while simultaneously reinforcing place-based actions and spreading good practices.

725 Nevertheless, if one considers the purpose of LFPGs and the networks connecting them to be  
726 addressing the most fundamental food system issues—e.g., inequities in trade and distribution,  
727 socioeconomic and racial injustices, unsustainable diets—such capacities currently remain limited. This  
728 underscores a larger critique about the relevance of the assemblage approach: it provides a useful lens  
729 for characterizing the nature of these groups, but does not provide a framework for how to counteract  
730 structurally entrenched forces with unstable and transient assemblages without clear agendas or  
731 membership structures.

## 732 733 **7. Conclusion**

734 This research informs discussions around the potential of *scaling up* municipal food policy and  
735 governance reforms to regional and national levels through trans-local solidarity. Scholars have  
736 suggested such collaborative action could be valuable, given that many municipal food system decisions  
737 are constrained by higher-level policies (Clancy, 2012; 2014). Moreover, since many cities face similar

food system issues, they may benefit from sharing ways to address them, especially if accelerated transformation occurs by *scaling* municipal innovations *out* to cities that have not yet entered the food planning realm. Instead of prescribing a template of food system reforms, Blay-Palmer *et al.* (2016: 31) have proposed developing a “suite of good practice options for communities [that] allows each community to select and develop their unique place-appropriate good practices and build knowledge-sharing networks at the same time.”

Following trans-local policy assemblage literature and current conceptualizations of transformative capacity, our analysis of SFCN and FPN demonstrates that municipal food governance ideas and practices are indeed not simply traveling from one place to the next unchanged, exemplified not only by the variety of lexicons adopted by LFPGs, but more fundamentally by their diverse structures, member compositions, funding sources, and activities. Some of these differences stem from specific political, geographical, and sociocultural contexts, revealing key distinctions between the two countries analyzed, such as the ability to institutionalize changes across scales and geographies. These situated contingencies indicate that municipalities may be employing a toolbox approach to place-based food reform, however they may also limit the ability of such assemblages to synthesize an identity strong enough to advance collective action at higher levels. Inequities in the allocation of support and resources may also limit the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the networks connecting them.

Comparing these networks has provided practical insights in how to cross-pollinate knowledge, good practices, and capacity-building between both SFCN and FPN, which may improve their processes and outcomes. It may also inform the efforts of trans-local food policy networks emerging at other scales (e.g., Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, CITYFOOD), and in other places (e.g., Germany, Netherlands, Scandinavia, Spain). However, this research also posits a key question to the academic and food policy community. What types of governance structures can reconcile flexible, place-based, and inclusive food system reform while tackling the structural causes of an unsustainable and unjust food system? It is

762 paramount to further explore what types of tools and agencies might build on and effectively bridge the  
763 gap between different practical and theoretical approaches to food system transformation.  
764



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## Figure Captions

### **Figure 1** Rise of local food policy groups – and the networks which connect them – globally

Depiction of the rapid rise of LFPGs over past decade, particularly in the US, Canada, and UK, juxtaposed with the creation of national, international, and state/regional networks to connect the LFPGs.

Data compiled from CLF's annual FPC directory update, SFCN website, websites and Facebook pages for LFPGs and state/regional networks, and personal communication. Other countries developing LFPGs include Belgium, Germany, New Zealand, and Spain. Other places, especially non-industrialized countries, may have different mechanisms for enacting municipal food policy reform, including traditional integrative food governance institutions not recorded in the English literature.

\*State/regional networks were included above if they play a role in convening, training, and/or instigating LFGPs (>3) beyond any role focused on influencing state-level policy.

\*13 LFGPs in the US and 24 in "other countries" counted in 2017 self-reported as still in development. 31 LFPGs in the US and 10 in Canada also reported as being in transition (redefining the purpose and/or structure of their group).

### **Table 1** Organizational characteristics and capacities of SFCN and FPN

Sources: Websites, personal communication. Text in brackets indicates projects still in development or planned.

\* SFCN issue areas: 1) public awareness about healthy, sustainable food, 2) food poverty, diet-related ill-health, healthy food access, 3) community food skills, 4) sustainable food economy, 5) food procurement, 6) food waste/ecological footprint.

\*SFCN's six flagship cities from 2013-16: Belfast, Bournemouth and Poole, Cardiff, Liverpool, Newcastle, and Stockport.

### **Figure 2** Network of networks: An example of international landscape of local food policy networks

An example of how an LFPG, itself a network of local food system stakeholders, may be embedded within a state or regional network of LFPGs (e.g., Ohio Local Food Policy Network above) as well as within the larger Food Policy Networks project, which connects food policy groups across North America. Note this figure only shows state/regional food policy networks if they play a role in convening, training, and/or instigating LFGPs (>3) beyond any role focused on influencing state-level policy.

\* US signatories also members of US Conference of Mayors Food Policy Task Force

\*\* Formed during or since 2016

### **Figure 3** An example of the interconnectedness of food policy groups in the US

An illustration of how LFPGs may actually interact with other LFPGs, state FPGs, national networks, and other organizations in reality. Some LFPGs may only interact with another LFPG or two; others may interact deeply with their state FPG or FPN and few others; some may not interact with any "umbrella" networks or other organizations at all. In addition to connecting LFPGs within their state, state FPGs may also interact with other state-level organizations and networks. FPN also interacts with several national organizations and networks in addition to LFPGs and state FPGs.