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Developing Local Food Policies: One City's Experiences

BETSY HAUGHTON

INCREASINGLY, city and state governments in the United States are assuming responsibility for the food supply by developing food policies (1-8). This is important at a time when the food-producing sector is threatened not only by insults to the environmental and agricultural resource base upon which it is based, but also by the loss of small farmers and their farmland (9-14). The U.S. food system is very productive, even in the mid-1970's producing 86% of the world's surplus food (15). However, it is also energy and water intensive, energy inefficient, soil-depleting, and reliant on limited natural resources for agricultural inputs. At the other end of the food supply network is the consumer, who must make food selections and thereby shape the food supply from a dazzling array of hundreds of food items, ranging from fresh and minimally processed foods to technologically fabricated and synthesized foodstuffs. Unfortunately, these food selections have contributed to morbidity and mortality, as 6 of the 10 leading causes of death in the United States have been related to dietary intake (16).

The development of a sound food policy is one means of addressing the issues and problems that impact on all those involved in the food supply network from the farm to the table. This paper defines food policy and describes its components, using one southeastern city's experiences as a model for how to develop a food policy.

FOOD POLICY

According to Webster's dictionary (17), a policy is any governmental principle, plan, or course of action; a wise, expedient or crafty conduct of management; or a document containing a contract of insurance. Some words are key to the definition of policy: government, wise, plan, and insurance. A policy, then, is something that concerns the public and assumes that there are some wise and desirable outcomes that can be guaranteed. In fact, a policy is a blueprint to guide planning of specific

actions to attain the policy's desired outcomes or goals. The role of food policy, then, is to guide decision-making at each point of the food system, from the environmental resource base that provides the foods, to food production, to processing, distribution, transportation, and marketing, to consumer purchase and preparation of foods, and ultimately to consumption as it relates to health and well-being. It is in consideration of this myriad of factors that a food policy defines very specific socially-approved goals and objectives from which both public and private planners may look to guide their actions (18). A policy will facilitate development of plans for implementing both short- and long-term solutions to problems. Plans can then be evaluated in terms not only of how they relate to the policy itself, but also of how well they resolve the identified problems and meet needs toward which the policy is addressed.

Why Have a Food Policy at the Local Level?

Most will agree that the United States does not have a single food policy; rather it has numerous policies and programs that impact upon the various points of the food system. Noteworthy are those related to agriculture (19–23), soil conservation (24–25), food safety (26), food aid (27), and, more recently, health. The health guidelines were proposed by the Surgeon General in the form of goals and objectives for the nation's health (28,29). These include several goals and numerous objectives concerning the relationship of food consumption to health.

Each of these policies and programs directly concerns at least one aspect of the food system, making a variety of assumptions about the food supply's sustainability, distribution, and consumption. However, none comprehensively addresses the entire food system, leading to fragmented planning and implementation that may put one set of plans in direct opposition to another set of plans. Lee (30) cites a variety of reasons why this system of multiple policies and programs is problematic, including lack of a framework to guide decision-making, an increase in the number of groups interested in food policy and planning, fragmented decision-making, inconsistencies in goals, unexpected and undesirable interactions of programs, changes in the structure of U.S. agriculture, limited natural resources, including energy, and increasing global interdependence of world agriculture and food supply. To this list of problems could be added widespread world hunger as it relates to our globalized food supply and the recognition that chronic food and nutrient deficits impact negatively upon health, well-being, and productivity.

At a more local level, metropolitan areas are becoming increasingly aware of the need for food policy as the number of requests for emergency food aid has increased (31). This possibly suggests more widespread hunger among certain population groups, particularly the poor, elderly, and women, infants, and children (32). At the same time that reports of hunger are increasing, federal supports are decreasing. Local legislators have found themselves in the awkward position of implementing plans that offer short-term solutions, possibly with unknown and adverse long-term consequences. Moreover, the food system is a factor traditionally not included in a city's comprehensive planning activities, despite the fact that food is vital to the well-being of the population. Transportation, health, housing, sanitation, regulatory measures, and emergency preparedness impact upon the food supply (31), and the food supply in turn impacts upon health and emergency preparedness. With the existence of a local food policy, decision-making and planning that offer both short- and long-term solutions are possible, and in a manner consistent with other plans and programs.

Developing the Food Policy Goals

The basic premise of any policy is that a set of goals exists upon which there can be consensus. This implies that the goals are specific to a particular region or population group and that those impacted upon by the policy and its resulting plans have been involved in development of the policy. Therefore, in order to develop a comprehensive food policy upon which strong legislative planning and action can be based, policy-makers must involve representatives from each point of the food system itself and from those concerned with food consumption and how it relates to health. This broad-based representation includes those concerned with the environmental resource base that ultimately provides food, to farmers, processors, marketers, distributors, and retailers, and to consumers, health educators, and health care providers.

Once the appropriate representatives have been assembled, their next task is to agree on the current and prospective problems related to the food system. From this assessment and prioritizing of needs, a common set of goals and objectives can be identified. It is these goals and objectives that form the basis of the food policy for that specific area and will guide decision-making. Although this process of assessment, goal-setting, and planning sounds relatively simple, the process itself may be quite difficult as the various representatives struggle with possible conflicts between

special interests and those of the entire population for whom the policy is intended.

Implementing Food Policy

Once the food policy is formulated, it provides the framework to guide decision-making and planning by all those involved in the food system. It is a reference point toward which planners can look to evaluate existing programs and guide the development of new programs. These plans and their resulting activities can, therefore, be viewed as implements to help attain a much broader set of goals concerning people and their relationship to food at each point of the food system.

Both public and private planners can ask themselves the extent to which particular plans and programs help attain the goals articulated by the food policy. The extent to which attainment of a policy goal is enhanced by a particular program may then guide decision-making about whether it should be continued, modified, or discontinued. For example, consider a food policy that has a goal related to access to food. Urban planners could refer to this food policy goal and evaluate the extent to which their metropolitan development goals and plans contribute to its attainment. If a particular urban revitalization program did not include activities to enhance access to food, then it could be revised to include this as a major parameter. Similarly, health and nutrition planners could evaluate the extent to which their programs are consistent with the goals related to access to food.

Implementation of the food policy is the responsibility of planners, both public and private. Creation and monitoring of the food policy is also the responsibility of all concerned. However, it is important to have official sanction not only for the existence of a food policy, but also for the delegation of responsibility to an independent body for creating, revising, and monitoring the food policy and for making recommendations for planning initiatives. At the local level this official sanction may originate from a mayoral mandate or governing council resolution. At the state level it may originate from an executive order or legislative ruling. Regardless of its origin, this official sanction is important for the usefulness of the policy. Without it, planners and legislators may have little incentive to use the policy to guide and evaluate plans and programs.

ONE CITY'S EXPERIENCES: KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE

Knoxville, Tennessee, is located in the southeastern part of the United States, nestled at the base of the Great Smoky Mountains. It is the third largest city in Tennessee with a population of just over 175,000, constituting 55% of the total Knox County population (33). Approximately 89% of the County's residents are White, while less than 9% are Black, and less than 1% are Hispanic, American Indian, and Oriental, respectively (34). Although the average per capita income for the County is \$8,357, approximately 14% of those living in the County are considered poor, and 71% of the poor live within the city limits (33). Only 25% of those living below the poverty level receive public assistance support (33). In 1983, the ten leading causes of death were heart disease, malignant neoplasm, cerebrovascular disease, accidents, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, pneumonia and influenza, diabetes mellitus, suicide, atherosclerosis, and homicide (34). Of these, five may be related to dietary intake.

That the food system is important to Knoxville's economy is suggested by the fact that almost 25% of all industrial, wholesale, and retail establishments are food-related. Furthermore, 14% of all value-added sales by manufacturing is food-related, and 15% of all retail employees work in food stores and eating and drinking places (3). There are 176 retail supermarkets, 5 food co-ops, and 2 farmers markets that provide food for County residents (34). It is estimated that there are over 300 restaurant and fast-food establishments (35). Both the City and County schools participate in reduced-price school breakfast and lunch programs.

Documentation of the Need for a Local Food Policy

The need for a food policy in Knoxville originated out of two major initiatives that were occurring simultaneously in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The first concerned a study of Knoxville's food system conducted by graduate students and faculty at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, as part of a city planning course (36). This study was prompted by concern for the lack of attention given by city planning agencies to food as an important urban support system.

The Knoxville food system study found that a significant number of the poor and elderly were living in the inner city with limited access to food and without comprehensive monitoring of either their nutritional and health status or the public programs created to address their needs.

In general, city residents spent about one-quarter of their income on food, with this proportion increasing as income decreased. Although most of the money spent on food was for that consumed at home, as much as 30% was spent for food consumed away from home. It was estimated that at least 20% of the residents participated daily in some form of public feeding program. This included participation in the United States Department of Agriculture's School Lunch Program, for which about 40% of all city school children qualified for free or reduced-price lunches. In relation to food production, the wholesale produce facility was inadequate to meet needs. Overall, no central coordinating agency was responsible for overseeing the food supply and facilitating local planning (36).

Shortly after completion of this study, the local Community Action Committee received a federal grant to investigate the problems of the poor and their access to food. The Community Action Committee had a history of working with the poor and developing and supporting programs to reduce hunger among inner city residents. The purpose of this two-year grant was to develop a report about inequities in the city food supply for the Mayor, Metropolitan Planning Commission, and Committee on Economic Development. A major conclusion of this report (37) was that access to food was indeed a problem for inner city residents. For example, without access to transportation, inner city residents often spent approximately 12% more for food than their mobile urban counterparts, and, in some low income neighborhoods, 20% of the residents paid for transportation by taxicab to buy food, thereby increasing the net cost of purchasing food (38).

*Legislative Sanction for Government Responsibility for Food Policy
and Creation of a Food Policy Council*

In 1981, as a result of these two initiatives and experience related to access to food, the Mayor presented a resolution on food policy to the City Council, which was passed with little debate on the first reading (39). This resolution was significant for several reasons. First, it stated that food is a concern of local government, since food impacts on the community's health and well-being. Food policy, therefore, became an official responsibility of Knoxville's government. Second, it recommended formation of a Food Policy Council with broad representation from the public and private sectors to monitor the city's food system and make recommendations for its improvement. Third, since the resolution

proposed by the Mayor was approved as a City Council resolution, its longevity was not limited to that particular Mayor's term of office. Food policy as part of city government and the existence of a Food Policy Council are assured unless new legislation is passed to the contrary.

The resolution called for creation of an interagency working group, composed of the Community Action Committee, Department of Community and Economic Development, and the Metropolitan Planning Commission, to develop a strategy to implement the resolution and improve the inner city food system. As mandated by the resolution, the goals of this strategy included access to an adequate and nutritious food supply for all citizens, economic bolstering of the local private food industry, improvement in the quality of food available, and encouragement of citizens to accept and consume nutritious foods.

Approximately four months after creation of the interagency working group, a report (37) was prepared proposing that the Food Policy Council should be advisory to the Mayor, City Council, and people of Knoxville and have oversight responsibility for guiding and coordinating plans and programs concerning Knoxville and their relationships to the food system. Annual reports were suggested to communicate information about the food system's current status and make recommendations for how to improve it. The Council's mission would be to evaluate the public health and economic consequences of Knoxville's food system. The proposal also included guidelines for Council membership and suggestions for initial issues and problems toward which the Council should direct its activities.

The Knoxville Food Policy's Goals and their Ramifications

The Food Policy Council began its work in 1982 with staff support from an interagency working group. It identified five food-policy goals that are significant, because they serve as a blueprint to guide planning at all points of the food system considered important for that city's needs. Moreover, although Knoxville itself is a metropolitan community, there is recognition of the importance not only of food in relation to health, but also of the environmental resource base in relation to sustainable food production. These five goals are:

1. ensure that an adequate and nutritious food supply is available to all citizens;
2. strengthen the economic vitality of the private food industry;
3. improve the quality of food available to all citizens;
4. encourage citizens to accept and consume nutritious food; and

5. minimize food-related activities which degrade the natural environment and limit wasteful use of scarce resources needed for food production and distribution (3).

The existence of a food policy and Council has had some significant impacts upon the city's food system, one of the most significant of which was the amendment of the Metropolitan Planning Commission's General Development Policy to include a provision related to the food supply and its distribution (2). Access to adequate, nutritious, and quality food must now be considered in planning for community development and land use. The city's Department of Housing and Urban Affairs has also been encouraged to give special attention to food stores and distribution in publicly-initiated or supported urban renewal programs (2). The concern for access to food stores has raised many issues for individuals from both the private and public sectors, including the feasibility of developing new shopping areas as part of redevelopment in the inner city. Access to food by inner city residents, particularly the elderly, has also been improved, however, by rerouting city buses and including a "grocery bus" program so that residents can shop in nearby neighborhoods. The Board of Education was encouraged to staff their food service with personnel with strong nutrition education backgrounds, resulting in a new Food Service Director with such qualifications. The school breakfast program has also been expanded and other food programs have been continued (1-2). At the state level, the Food Policy Council also supported legislation to remove the state sales tax on food, arguing that the tax was regressive, with the poor paying a disproportionate share of their income for food (2). The private sector has also responded to Food Policy Council efforts, as illustrated by the Knoxville Chamber of Commerce's recent attention to food, health, and social services as part of its Chamber goals (40).

In 1985 a public hearing was held by the Food Policy Council to consider food problems in Knoxville. Twenty witnesses testified about food and the economy, local resources for food production, poverty and food access, health, and food safety and emergency planning. The testimonies indicated that there are a variety of agencies and people interested in the City's food system and that there are many problems requiring community-oriented actions. Furthermore, overall there is support for the Food Policy Council. Based on the hearing, the Food Policy Council has identified five major areas for future community action: 1) poverty as it relates to access to food; 2) nutrition education programs to reduce food-related health problems; 3) support and strengthening of the City's food industry; 4) development of land use policy for future

food production; and 5) better communication with state agencies and legislators about food-related interests (3).

One of the ways that the Food Policy Council is seeking to facilitate its mission is the creation of volunteer advisory committees with technical expertise in particular areas. Recently, the Nutrition and Health Advisory Committee (41) reported on the major food-related problems in Knoxville and is now charged with recommending ways that restaurants and food stores can encourage selection of nutritious food and meals. A Food Industry Advisory Committee is also in the early stages of formation and will be charged with advising how the local food industry can be strengthened (3). This committee will receive some staff assistance through a contract with the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Projected advisory committees will be in the areas of agriculture and land, consumer interests, social services, food-related public agencies, and civic and religious organizations.

SUMMARY

Since the idea of a coordinated and broad-based food policy is so new to the United States as a whole and to its regional, state, and local areas, there are few models toward which policy-makers and planners can look. The need for a food policy is increasingly being promoted (11,18,42,43). However, the mechanics of developing and implementing that policy are just being explored. Knoxville's experiences have been slow, but directed and persistent. They provide examples of how joint efforts of public and private agencies can generate interest in and awareness of the problems of hunger and of access to a sustainable and quality food supply. This baseline assessment of an area's problems and needs is critical for officially-sanctioned recognition of the government's responsibility for food policy, and accountability of its plans and programs so that they are consistent with that policy.

Knoxville's experiences are but one model that is one of the first of its kind. Other cities are now developing their own strategies, including Charleston, South Carolina; Kansas City, Missouri; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and St. Paul, Minnesota (6,8,31). A number of states (4,7) have also been working on food policy, including New York State which recently created a New York State Council on Nutrition and Food Policy at the Governor's initiative (44). It will only be through experience that effective strategies will be identified, and it may be that these strategies are region or population-specific. However, without these experiences, fragmented decision-making at each point of the food system will con-

tinue to lead to inconsistencies in that system that may impact negatively on the population's health and its economic and social well-being.

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ABSTRACT

Food policy is an important parameter of city planning to guide decision-making at each point of the food system. It defines socially-approved goals and objectives from which public and private planners may look to guide and evaluate their programs and activities. The need for a food policy is identified and its components described, using Knoxville, Tennessee’s experiences as a model for how to develop a food policy.