

CHARACTERISTICS OF REGIONAL FOOD POLICY COUNCILS IN THE UNITED STATES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Food system reform presents an opportunity to address significant social, environmental, and economic problems. In this context, food policy councils (FPCs) play an important role as relational hubs, bringing together diverse stakeholders to collaboratively identify and develop solutions at a variety of different geographic scales.

More recently, researchers and practitioners have begun to discuss the importance of regional approaches to food systems work and governance. Working regionally — which is defined for this report as FPC arrangements that span multiple county and/or state borders — offers the potential of building greater diversity, resilience, and sustainability across regional food systems. Regional approaches encompass the complex networks of actors, overarching regulations and policies, socioeconomic dynamics, processes, and relationships associated with food production, processing, marketing, and consumption, across regions including rural, urban, and peri-urban areas.

Little is known, though, about the current state and practices of regional FPCs in the United States. In response to this limitation, researchers and FPC practitioners with the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, Ohio State University, and Colorado State University, in collaboration with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agriculture Marketing Service (AMS) have partnered to explore the current state of regional FPCs in the US and develop resources and materials to support regional approaches elsewhere. Through a community of practice with 11 regional FPCs from across the continental US, the project aims to learn about the

approaches of regional FPCs to inform future practice and policy.

Drawing on FPC census information from the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future combined with information from 11 FPCs participating in a regional community of practice, this report provides a preliminary exploration of the characteristics of US FPCs operating at a regional scale. This analysis reveals that, while regional FPCs have grown in total numbers since 2016, this growth contains significant turnover in the population. Additionally, the years analyzed in this report indicate that regional councils increasingly operate as independent nonprofit organizations with less formal connection to government compared to FPCs of other geographic scales. Additionally, regional FPCs are also more likely than other geographic scale FPCs to include representatives of and focus on issues related to economic development, though this focus shifted more towards food security during the COVID-19 pandemic, following a similar shift by all FPCs.

The report concludes with three case studies of regional FPCs: the Greater Cincinnati Regional Food Policy Council in Ohio/Kentucky/Indiana, the Northwest Indiana Food Council, and the Cass Clay Food Partners in North Dakota/Minnesota. These cases provide illustrative examples of regional FPCs with different geographic locations, motivations, and governing structures. The report concludes with a discussion of key takeaways and important next steps for advancing research and practice related to regional FPCs.

INTRODUCTION

Food system reform presents an opportunity to address significant social, environmental, and economic problems, including climate change, environmental degradation, economic inequality, and disparities in food and nutritional security. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic, and its associated impacts on increased food insecurity and supply chain disruptions, highlighted the need to ameliorate reliance on fragile global supply chains and invest in more resilient, localized, and/or regional supply chains.

Effectively capitalizing on these opportunities requires engaging diverse food and agriculture stakeholders across a region in collaborative development of policy and programmatic solutions. One such approach to foster collaborative problem solving in local, state, regional, or Tribal food systems is food policy councils (FPCs). FPCs function as relational hubs, bringing together participants representing diverse interests and perspectives — including urban and rural regions — to develop relationships, engage in learning, and work together on common goals for food systems change. From 2000 to 2021, FPCs have grown from eight to approximately 300 in the United States and Tribal nations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, FPCs served critical roles in connecting producers with new

supply chains and markets, and in supporting food insecure communities. They have also taken leading roles in addressing racial and social inequity and generating policy proposals to respond to the pandemic.¹

As conveners of food system stakeholders, FPCs epitomize a relatively recent move toward multi-stakeholder governance approaches to policy development and implementation. By “governance,” we are referring to modes of public decision making that bring together government and nongovernment stakeholders to define, develop, and/or implement policy solutions.² Specifically, FPCs are emblematic of collaborative governance where actors collaboratively work to develop and implement public policy decisions.³ For this analysis, governance refers to any situation where representatives from public and private sectors work together to develop, implement, and/or manage public programs and policies.

FPCs operate at a variety of different geographic scales, including individual cities, a city and its encompassing county, individual counties, multi-county or multi-state regions, entire states, and those working on Tribal lands.⁴ Recently, researchers and practitioners have begun to focus specifically on the role and importance of regional approaches to food systems work and governance,

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1. Palmer, A., Atoloye, A., Bassarab, K., Calancie, L., Santo, R., & Cooksey Stowers, K. (2020). COVID-19 responses: Food policy councils are “stepping in, stepping up, and stepping back”. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 10(1), 223–226.
 2. Kettl, D. F. (1997). “The global revolution in public management: Driving themes, missing links.” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 16(3): 446-462; Kettl, D. F. (2002). *The transformation of governance: Public administration for the twenty-first century*. Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press.
 3. Ansell, C. (2016). *Collaborative governance as creative problem-solving. Enhancing Public Innovation by Transforming Public Governance*. J. Torfing and P. Triantafyllou. Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press: 35; Emerson, K. and T. Nabatchi (2015). *Collaborative governance regimes*. Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press.
 4. For further information on FPCs at different geographic scales, visit; <https://clf.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=daaf010d6cc24089a0ca14e6cb235c40>

including regional FPCs.⁵ For instance, the US Department of Agriculture has moved to increase support for efforts that focus on food systems at regional levels. Working regionally — which is defined for this report as FPC arrangements that span multiple county and/or state borders — offers the potential of building greater diversity, resilience, and sustainability across regional food systems.⁶

Regional approaches encompass the complex networks of actors, processes, and relationships across rural, urban, and peri-urban areas in a region. Achieving regional goals requires building connections across these diverse regional actors. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of a regional approach to food system governance, little is known about the current state and practices of regional FPCs in the United States.⁷ In response to this limitation, researchers and FPC practitioners with the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF), Ohio State University, and Colorado State University, in collaboration with the USDA Agriculture Marketing Service (AMS), have partnered to

explore the current state of regional FPCs in the US and develop resources and materials to support regional approaches elsewhere. Through a community of practice with 11 regional FPCs from across the continental US, this project aims to provide information on the implementation of regional FPCs to inform future practice and policy.

Drawing on FPC census information from the CLF, combined with information from the 11 FPCs participating in the community of practice, this report provides a preliminary exploration of the characteristics of US FPCs by geographic scale, with particular attention to those operating at a regional scale (i.e., encompassing more than one county and/or state). The report aims to provide information in response to the following questions.

1. What are the characteristics of regional FPCs and how have they changed over time?
2. How are regional FPCs different, if at all, from other geographic scales?

DATA & METHODS

This regional FPC analysis used data from the CLF annual census of FPCs. Started in 2013, the FPC census annually asks councils about topics including their geographic scale (city, county, city/county combined, regional, or state), organizational and governance structures, policy and organizational priorities, stakeholder membership and engagement strategies, and funding sources.

This analysis focuses on the years 2016 to 2020 when questions of interest could be paired with information on the geographic scale of the council. Additionally, this analysis focuses on a select set of topics (outlined below), including governance structure, membership and representation, connection to government, policy priorities, and organizational priorities.

5. Santini, G., et al. (2017). City region food system tools and examples. Rome, Italy, UN Food and Agriculture Organization.

6. Ruhf, K. Z. and K. Clancy (2022). A Regional Imperative: The Case for Regional Food Systems Thomas A. Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems.

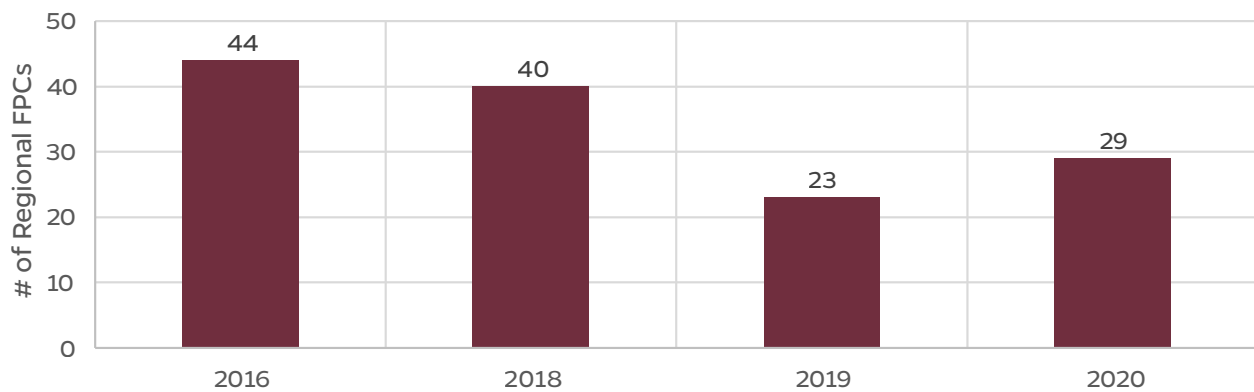
7. Ibid.

A total of 86 councils self-identified as “regional” — working across county and/or state boundaries — for at least part of this period (See Figure 1). This population contains a significant amount of turnover, as regional FPCs are created, newly identify as regional, or are disbanded/cease to identify as regional in scale. This churn echoes a similar level of turnover for FPCs across all geographic scales. These data suggest a steep decline in the number of regional FPCs reported in 2019 and to a lesser degree in 2020.

The first section in this report describes this turnover rate among regional councils.

After that, each section provides descriptive analysis of regional FPCs for the years in this analysis and bivariate analysis comparing regional FPCs to those of different geographic scales. Bivariate analysis focuses only on characteristics where responses from regional councils differed from those of other scale councils (i.e., city, county, city/county, Tribal, or state) to a statistically significant degree.⁸ Where appropriate, the report notes how responses from regional councils differed from those of other scale councils. However, the report does not present data on other councils.

Figure 1. Count of regional FPCs by year captured in the CLF census of FPCs⁹



8. This report uses the significance level of 0.05.

9. Census data for 2018 represent the combined 2017 and 2018 directory information. The decrease in the number of regional councils in 2019 reflects an overall decrease in council response rate for all geographic scales. Additionally, 2019 was the first year that the survey also included clarification about regional by adding (multi-county or multi-state) after regional. This likely changed how councils responded to that question.

FINDINGS

The following sections outline notable findings regarding the characteristics of regional FPCs and how they compare to councils of other geographic scales.

Development, Dissolution, and Reclassification

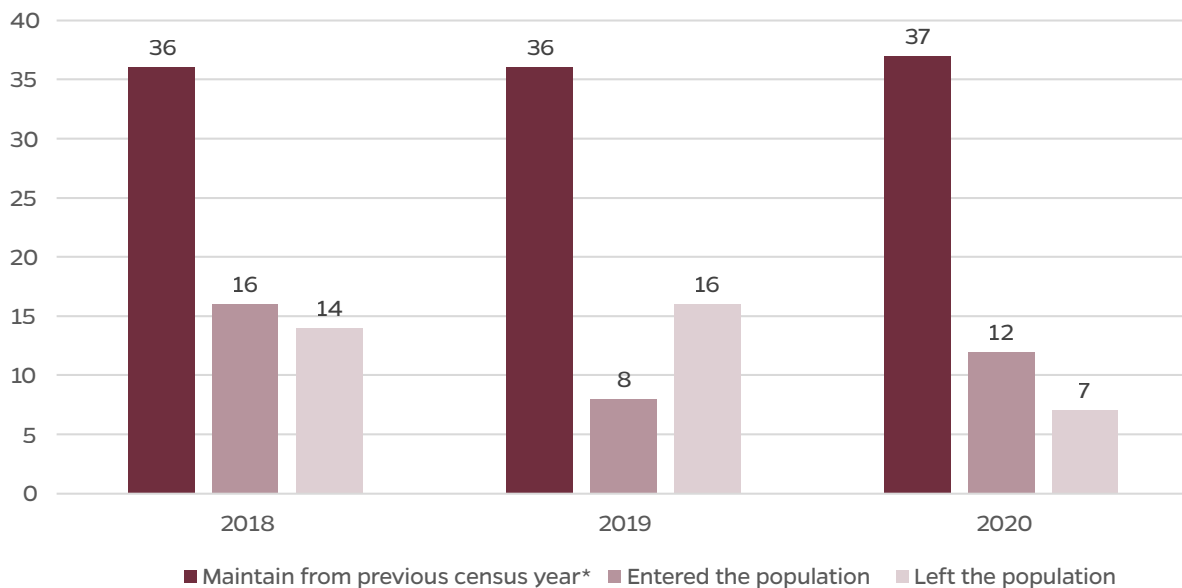
In order to track the development and dissolution of regional FPCs, this analysis matched councils across years by the council name and location. Because of the nature of the census data, not every council responded every year during this period. Therefore, councils were counted as being operational for the entire period under the following circumstance: a council completed the survey an initial year, skipped the survey the second year, but completed the survey the third year.

CLF's data on FPCs indicate that the first regional council — Food Access Committee of

the Nutrition and Fitness Collaborative of the Central Coast in California — was established in 2003. Since that council, the rate of regional FPC development was between one and five new regional councils per year through 2011. The years 2012 to 2015 saw a rapid increase in the number of regional FPCs being created, with nine new councils in 2012, 16 in 2013, eight in 2014, and nine in 2015. Since 2016, the total number of FPCs identifying as regional has fallen to fewer than 40.

These rates of increase and decrease, however, hide a significant degree of churn in the population of regional FPCs. While more councils entered the population by identifying as regional, others left or no longer identified as regional in scale. Figure 2 indicates the number of councils that either continued in the data as regional, entered the population, or left the population for the years 2018 through 2020.

Figure 2. Births and Deaths of Regional Groups between 2018 and 2020



*The census year prior to 2018 included in this analysis was 2016. In 2016, 43 councils identified as regional.

This churn is the result not only of the development and disbandment of regional councils, but also their identification and deidentification as having a regional scale.

Governance Structure

For the purposes of this analysis, governance structure refers to how the council is organized and operates institutionally. This includes whether the council functions as a government advisory body and how they are institutionally structured, including whether they exist as

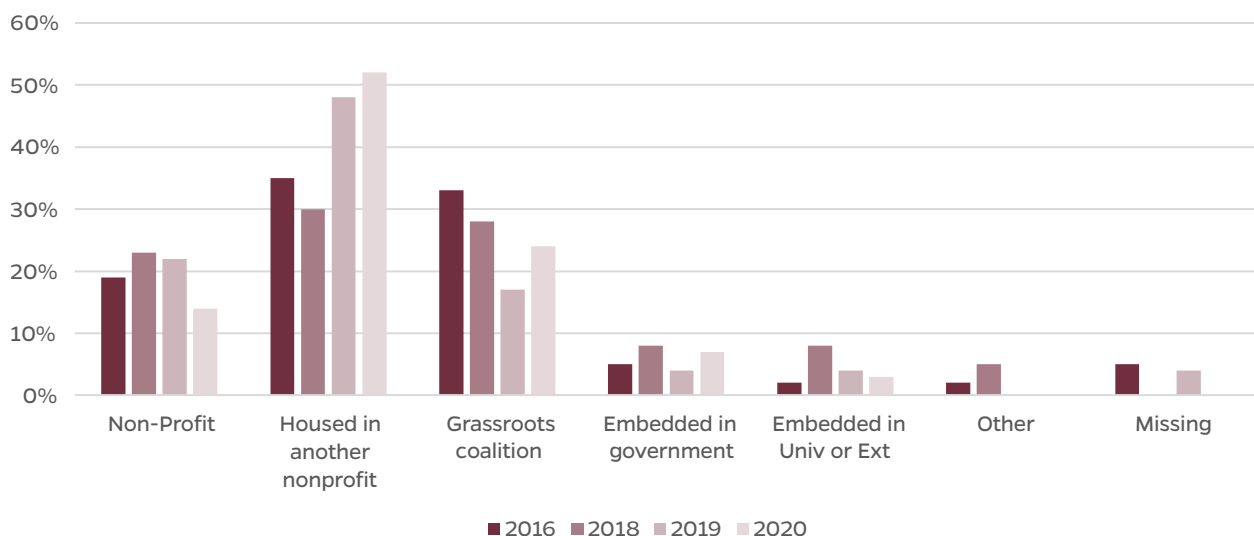
- a. Nonprofit (e.g., certified 501(c)3 or other 501(c) category)
- b. Housed in another nonprofit (e.g., nonprofit serves as fiscal agent or FPC is a project of a nonprofit)
- c. Grassroots coalition
- d. Embedded in government (e.g., county or provincial organization)
- e. Embedded in a university/college or Extension office

Analyzing governance structure provides useful insight into how FPCs are structuring

themselves administratively and institutionally. This analysis provides valuable insight into the relative level of formalization of regional FPCs (e.g., whether they are structured as grassroots coalitions or formalized nonprofits). While most data on governance structure were self-reported by members of councils, some councils were coded by researchers based on their qualitative responses to this question’s “other” response category.

Regional FPCs are commonly embedded within other nonprofits, a trend that increased over the years in this analysis. Simultaneously, data during this period show a decrease in the tendency of regional FPCs existing as grassroots coalitions. Both trends reflect broader governance trends among FPCs at other geographic scales. When compared to FPCs at other scales, regional councils are more likely to be housed in another nonprofit or be grassroots organizations. Regional councils are also the least likely to be housed in government (See Figure 3). However, it is important to note that these changes in governance structure also accompany a sharp decline in the total number of regional FPCs overall during the period of evaluation.

Figure 3. Governance structures of regional FPCs.



Membership

As conveners of food system stakeholders, a key consideration for FPCs is its membership. As might be expected, membership is highly correlated with the issues that FPCs prioritize.¹⁰ The annual questionnaire asks respondents to report whether particular types of stakeholders are members of the FPC. Figure 4 provides a list of the different categories of stakeholders and the percentage of regional FPCs in each year that indicated that a given category of stakeholder was included in their membership. This figure is arranged from least to most likely to be indicated as represented by councils in 2020.

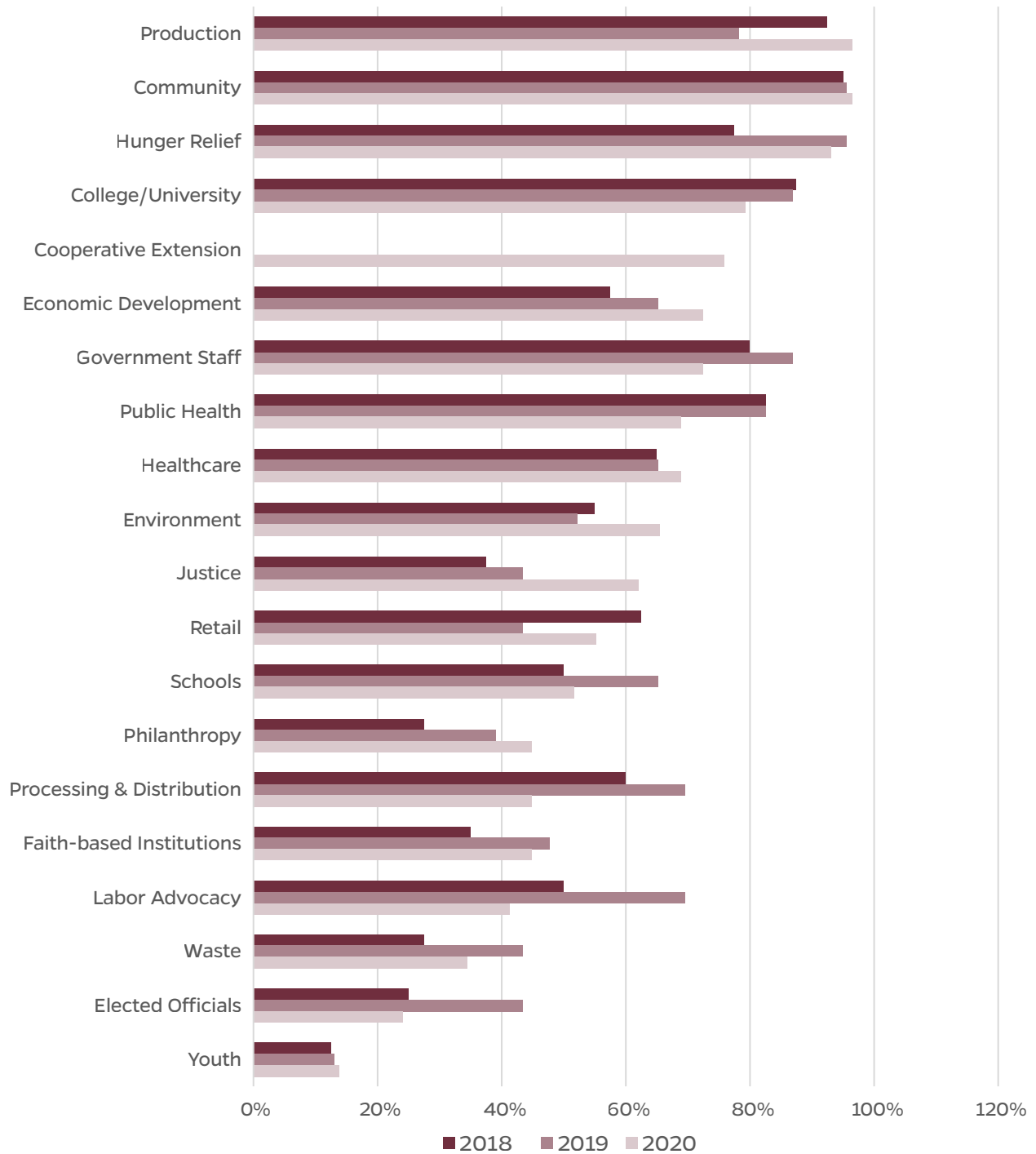
Regional FPCs are most likely to engage members representing the broader community, agricultural production (e.g., farmers and ranchers), and hunger relief organizations, sector representations that broadly parallel FPCs of other geographic scales. Representatives of the waste sector, youth representatives, and elected officials are the least likely to be represented as members on regional FPCs.

During this period, regional FPCs increasingly included members representing economic development, environment, and philanthropic institutions. However, they have grown less likely to include members representing processing and public health. Representation of economic development is a notable area where regional FPCs contrast with FPCs of other geographic scales. Regional councils are more likely than councils of smaller geographic scales to include members representing economic development interests. Relatedly, regional councils are more likely to have members representing processing and production than councils of smaller

geographic scales and are less likely to have representatives from public health or hunger organizations than most other scales.

10. Bassarab, K., et al. (2019). "Finding our way to food democracy: Lessons from US food policy council governance." *Politics and governance* 7(4): 32-47.

Figure 4. Percentage of regional FPCs reporting membership representation by type of member.



*Data on membership of Cooperative Extension representatives is only available for 2020 as that is the first year that category of response was added to the membership question. In previous years, Cooperative Extension was considered part of the College/University category.

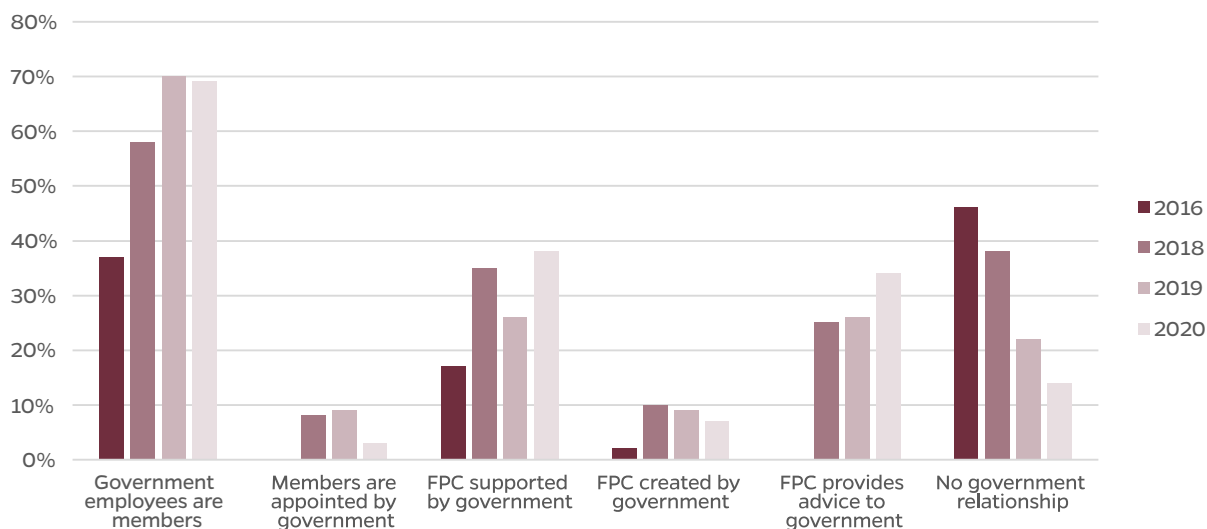
Connection to Government

The type of connection that FPCs have to government — if any — provides useful insights into the degree to which FPCs are embedded in and/or influential in the policy development, formulation, and implementation process. Additionally, types of connection to government also provide a proxy for understanding the level of formal governmental influence FPCs wield. Compared to FPCs of other geographic scales, regional FPCs are the least likely to report some connection with government (e.g., members of government represented on the

council, council members being appointed by government, etc.).

While regional FPCs continue to be less likely than other geographic scales to have a connection with government, they have started to report a greater likelihood of being connected to government since 2018. The most common way for regional FPCs to have a connection with government is by having government employees as members in the council. This movement towards greater representation of government on regional councils reflects a significant shift, as regional councils were among the most likely to report no relationship with government in 2016.

Figure 5. Percentage of regional FPCs reporting connections to government.¹¹



Policy Priorities

Questions about policy priorities provide insight into actual work and focus of FPCs. Looking at policy priorities can provide insight into the issues that motivate regional FPCs compared to other geographic scales. The annual survey asks councils to select only their top three policy priorities. The top policy

priorities of regional FPCs focus on issues of food access, procurement, production, and economic development (Figure 6). Food access as a policy priority has gained more significant attention from regional FPCs, while economic development has declined as a policy priority. However, regional FPCs are generally still more likely to prioritize economic development. Regional FPCs, more than city or city/county

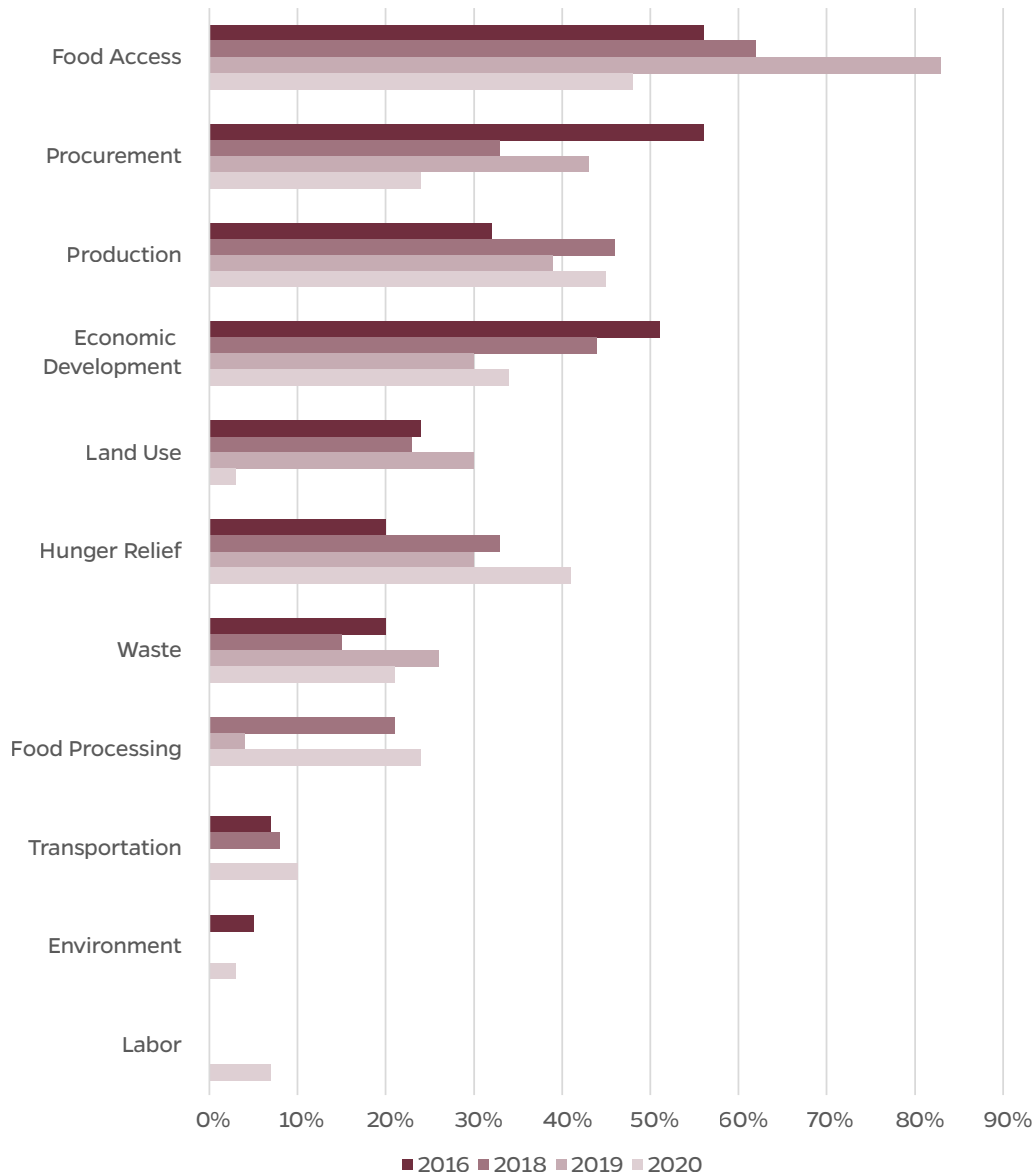
11. Due to the structure of the survey question, values for “Government employees are members” as involved in Figure 5 are not equal to the values for government staff as members in Figure 4.

FPCs, focus on production, procurement, and processing, and are less likely than city or city/county FPCs to identify hunger relief as a top policy priority.

Importantly, this analysis of regional FPC priorities shows significant changes in priority starting in 2020. This likely reflects the onset

of the COVID-19 pandemic as FPCs began to shift their attention to emergency response and away from long-term planning issues like land access for agricultural production. Yet, compared to more local FPCs, regional FPCs are overall still less likely to focus on issues like food access and hunger relief.

Figure 6. Percentage of regional FPCs indicting a policy topic is a priority.



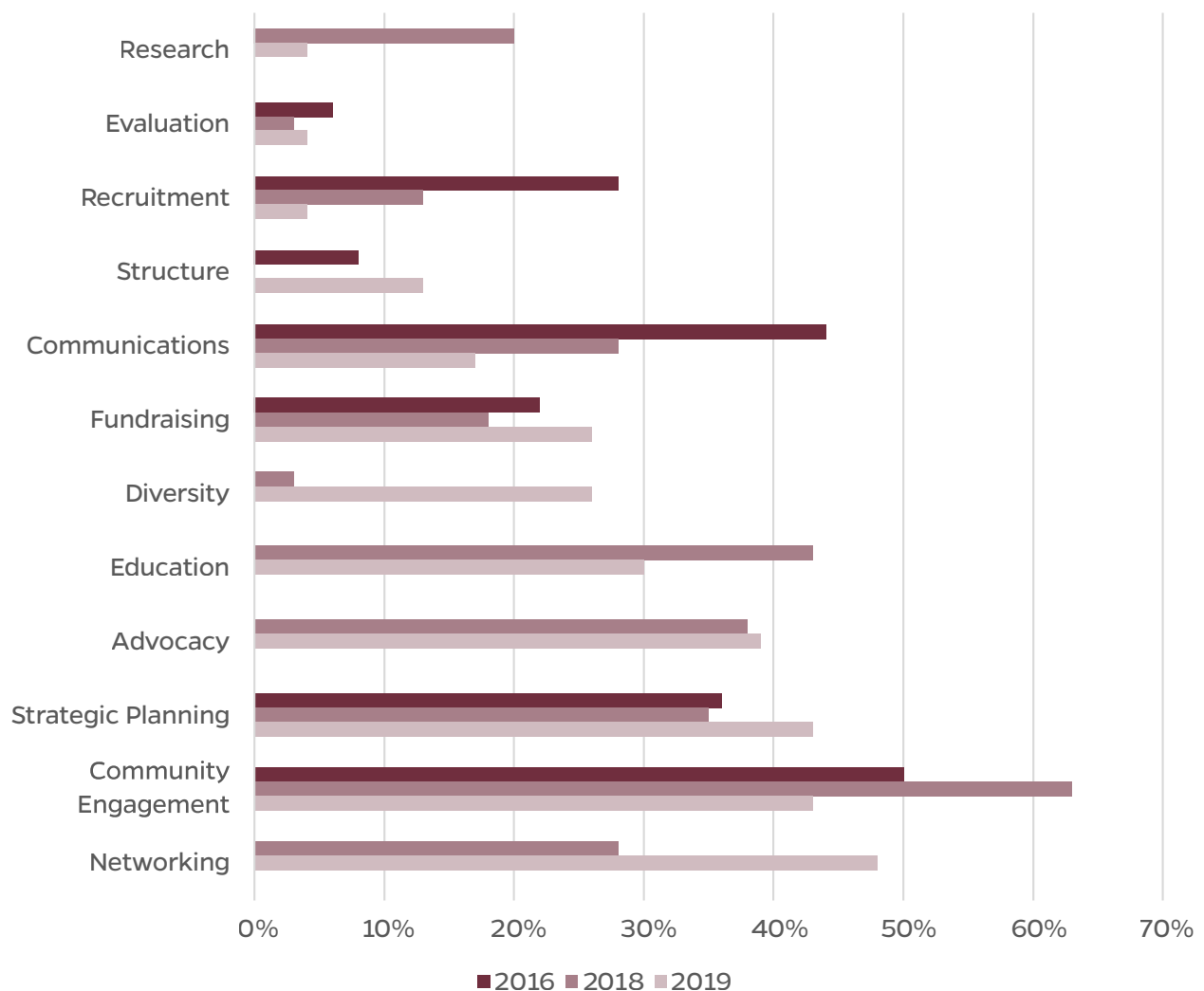
*The 2020 survey focused on COVID-19 responses, thus priority changes compared to 2019 likely reflect this narrowed focus.

Organizational Priorities

In addition to policy priorities, census data also collected information on the organizational priorities of FPCs (i.e., the activities of the organization). As with policy priorities, the annual survey asks councils to select only their top three organizational priorities. Organizational priorities provide insight into how FPCs go about influencing policy and programmatic work. For instance, a strong organizational focus on community engagement rather than research likely suggests that councils see their role increasingly as conveners of community.

Regional FPCs report a high prioritization of organizational activities such as advocacy, community engagement, networking, and strategic planning (Figure 7). Additionally, the years captured by this analysis suggest that regional FPCs have become more interested in growing the diversity of their membership, something that likely reflects the growing societal attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion more broadly. However, regional FPCs report relatively low prioritization of activities such as recruitment, evaluation, and research.

Figure 7. Regional FPC organizational priorities.



Additionally, despite the growing interest in membership diversity, attention to this priority is still lower among regional councils compared to local FPCs that are more likely to focus on organizational activities such as engagement and growing diversity.

Over time, compared to FPCs of other geographic scales, regional FPCs reported a greater likelihood than most other scales of

FPC of being interested in strategic planning¹² and fundraising.¹³ This may reflect the status of regional FPCs as relatively new entities and, thus, more focused on planning and financing their work. Additionally, this focus may be a result of their broader geographic coverage that draw regional FPCs to focus on larger scale economic development and strategic regional planning activities rather than narrower policy actions.

EXAMPLES OF REGIONAL FOOD POLICY COUNCILS

The following provide illustrations of regional food councils and the variety of forms they take, motivations for forming, and approaches to stakeholder engagement. These vignettes are drawn from interviews and document analysis conducted in collaboration with these councils, which are all participants in the regional community of practice. The illustrations provide insight into different ways that regional councils conceptualize their region, relate to government, engage members, and structure themselves organizationally.

Greater Cincinnati Regional Food Policy Council

The Greater Cincinnati Regional Food Policy Council (GCRFPC) is emblematic of a regional council where the unifying regional characteristic is the economic and social importance of a large metropolitan center. Though the city government was a major

founding partner and continues to collaborate formally with the council, the council explicitly framed its geographic scale to be regional in recognition of the interdependency among the counties and states that surround Cincinnati, Ohio. The council now encompasses 10 counties spanning southwestern Ohio (Hamilton, Butler, Clermont, and Warren counties), northern Kentucky (Boone, Campbell, Kenton, and Grant counties), and southeastern Indiana (Franklin and Dearborn counties). This regional scale of work allows the council to better make connections between different actors and issues connected to food and agriculture in the region.

Organizationally, GCRFPC takes a collective impact approach. This involves engaging and coordinating the efforts of relevant organizations and agencies so that their efforts are complementary. This structure is facilitated by a backbone organization, in this case, the nonprofit Green Umbrella — a regional climate collaborative — which leads

12. Only city-level FPCs were more likely to be focused on strategic planning.

13. Only state-level FPCs were more likely to be focused on fundraising.

the coordination of involved stakeholders. One area of work that is key to this coordination involves analyzing the food and agriculture policy and government environment of each of the counties in the region. This provides important baseline information for the council when identifying issues and developing its strategic plan. While the council is not directly sponsored or hosted by the governments in its region, local government employees and officials are members of the council and its broader network.

The council membership is based on an application model, where interested individuals submit applications to sit on the council. Applications are reviewed by the existing council and selected members serve terms of between one and three years. The council also engages participants through both informal networks as well as a formal community advisory committee that provides citizen feedback on council plans and activities. According to council surveys, the broader network of council participants reflects the demographic and geographic diversity of the council's region.

Northwest Indiana Food Council

In contrast to GCRFPC, the Northwest Indiana Food Council (NWIFC) began with the express purpose of serving at a regional scale. This region, colloquially known as “The Region” by locals, includes seven counties: Lake, Porter, LaPorte, Newton, Starke, Jasper, and Pulaski. These counties are united by shared cultural, economic, administrative, and social identity that distinguishes them both from the rest of the state of Indiana and from nearby Chicago.

NWIFC was developed with the involvement of over 100 community members participating in a local food event. The express purpose of the

development of the council was to coordinate the efforts of myriad food projects being led by independent organizations across the region and to better pool resources across the region to accomplish shared goals. To coordinate these projects, founding members helped establish NWIFC as an independent nonprofit in 2016.

A key activity that helped inform the formation and strategic planning of the council were community-level “meetups.” These were held in collaboration with partner organizations every several months for two years and provided an opportunity for council members to listen to the issues and priorities of individuals and groups from across the region. These meetups were paired with several community events. These included an annual Food Expo and Discussion that brought together several hundred community members for panels on regionally relevant food and agricultural issues. The council also led numerous Farm Hop events that involved stakeholders in farm tours to learn about agricultural issues and develop urban-rural connections between the more urban northern counties and the more rural southern counties. During the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown, the council began to shift its focus towards value-chain coordination activities, which has remained a central focus of its work in the years following the pandemic.

A central focus of the council's membership goals during and following the pandemic has been building out the regional representation on its board of directors. The council board is entirely volunteer based. A key challenge in the early years of the council's operation was engaging representatives from the more rural counties on the southern side of the region. As a result of this focus, the council filled out its board with members who represent the region's diverse, social, cultural, economic, and geographic population. This emphasis on

cross-cutting food systems representation builds on the council's early networking and programmatic work, which focused on bridging food systems topics from farm viability to food access. This early programming and networking have positioned NWIFC as an expert organization on various food systems topics as it works to further engage elected officials and public sector decision-makers.

Cass Clay Food Partners

The Cass Clay Food Partners regional food council encompasses a mix of urban and rural communities in western Minnesota and eastern North Dakota. This region includes two counties — Cass County, North Dakota and Clay County, Minnesota — and five municipalities, including Fargo, West Fargo, and Horace, in North Dakota, and Moorhead and Dilworth, in Minnesota. Unique among the councils highlighted in this report, Cass Clay was formed as an intergovernmental body and remains a government-affiliated advisory council enabled by a joint-powers agreement between the City of Fargo and Clay County. As a result, government employees and elected officials are significant members of the council.

Cass Clay Food Partners includes three different organizational components: Steering Committee, Food Commission, and Food Action Network. The Cass Clay Food Partners Steering Committee is an advisory committee made up of key government and issue experts who provide organization and management for the overarching Food Partners organization. Additionally, it includes non-voting representatives from Fargo Cass Public Health, Clay County Public Health, the Steering Committee, and Fargo-Moorhead Metro Council of Governments.

Next, the Cass Clay Food Commission includes representatives from each of the seven government jurisdictions listed above who are appointed by the jurisdictions they represent. The Commission also includes five at-large members who are recommended by the steering committee and voted on by the rest of the Commission to serve a two-year term. Finally, the third organizational component of Cass Clay Food Partners is the Cass Clay Food Action Network, which leads community engagement work. A historical example includes hosting “First Fridays,” community events that provide a venue for anybody in the community to engage in and discuss food system issues.

The Food Partners' role is as a research and advisory group for local municipalities and their residents. This began by advising the City of Fargo, North Dakota, on the implementation of a backyard chicken policy in response to citizen interest. The council avoids active lobbying for any given policy, instead focusing on providing education resources for policymakers in the local jurisdictions. One such product that the council produces are policy “blueprints.” Blueprints provide background information on food or agriculture issues relevant to the region's food system and outline health, environment, economic, and social benefits and/or concerns of potential policy actions based on cases of implementation from other jurisdictions around the United States. The intent of the blueprints is to provide balanced information for local policy makers, while leaving policy implementation to the local jurisdictions.

DISCUSSION

This analysis is an initial step towards understanding and advancing regional food system policy work. In this final section, we highlight some notable observations from this data.

Regional FPC Turnover

The most notable takeaway from this analysis is the significant churn in regional food policy councils forming, dissolving, and reclassifying themselves. There are several potential explanations for this turnover in regional councils. First, the fluctuation in regional councils may simply reflect a limitation of the self-report nature of the census. Respondents may not be the same within each council from year to year, thus leaving room for one respondent to classify a council as regional, while another might see the council's work as primarily focused on some other geographic scale.

Even if some amount of this churn is indicative of self-report error in the census, this potential for interpreting regionality differently from respondent to respondent reflects a fundamental uncertainty about the nature of regionality itself and what it means to work regionally. Unlike all other FPCs' geographic scales (i.e., municipal, county, county/municipality combined, or state), many "regional" FPCs do not encompass an area pre-prescribed by a single governmental boundary (e.g., city, county, or state). Rather, regions are governance areas that are frequently not predefined by existing boundaries and may fluctuate in scale depending on the nature of the issues the FPC seeks to address. Observations of regional FPCs participating in the national community

of practice support the idea that regional FPCs are frequently evolving and changing to adapt themselves to their context and the needs of their respective regions.

It is important to note that the process of adaptation that regional FPCs are going through to define their scale and regionality echoes that of other forms of regional governance in the United States. Regional entities such as councils of governments, regional commissions (e.g., the Great Lakes Commission), or natural resource conservation districts defined the boundaries of their work to address a problem impacting multiple adjacent jurisdictions in an area. The bounds of these entities were defined by motivating problems that vary significantly in scale and nature from setting to setting. Regional FPCs follow the same pattern.

Focus on Economic Development & Supply Chains

Though policy priority responses also contain a significant degree of variability and offer few consistent trends, one relatively notable characteristic of regional FPCs is their comparatively greater attention to economic development as well as procurement and processing compared to other geographic scales. Furthermore, procurement and processing are connected with intermediated market channels, which regional FPCs — with their greater geographic scope — are better positioned to address compared to more local FPCs.

Attention to these topics may be a manifestation of the political context of regional work. Unlike other FPCs (e.g., municipal, county, or state), regional FPCs

must coordinate across political jurisdictions. Based on observations and research conducted in collaboration with councils participating in the regional FPC community of practice, multi-jurisdictional coordination — which relies on horizontal relationships where no one entity has the authority to compel another to take a policy action — may increase the motivation for regional FPCs to focus on activities that pursue mutually beneficial non-binding plans rather than trying to implement policy changes. In essence, the focus of regional FPCs on economic development, procurement, and processing may simply be because that work is easier to generate interest from other political and organizational entities in the area.¹⁴

Lack of Connection to Government

A final noteworthy characteristic of regional FPCs is their lesser degree of connection to government compared to other geographic scales. As stated above, this characteristic may reflect the unique political environment of regional FPCs that must navigate the dynamics of multiple political bodies (e.g., counties). In this context, it is not surprising that regional FPCs are less likely to adopt a formal relationship with government beyond inclusion of government employees on the member board, as alignment with a single jurisdictional government may risk upsetting the political balance and, thus, undermining the regional FPC's ability to maintain alliances across governmental partners.

However, it is noteworthy that regional FPCs have started to report significantly more connection to government in the forms of involving government employees and/or giving advice to government. This may indicate that

regional FPCs are becoming more accepted by and influential with the regions' local governments, such that local governments increasingly see value in participating in and seeking advice from regional FPCs. As regional FPCs become more well recognized and accepted players within their political/governance environments, they may be able to exercise greater influence in the form of direct relationships with governments in their region.

Response Variability and Data Limitations

One observation from this analysis is the high degree of variability in responses from year to year. This is evident in and discussed in relation to the apparent churn in the population of regional FPCs. However, variability is also observable in regional FPC responses to policy focus, organizational priorities, and membership. There are three potential explanations for observed response variability.

Response variability may result from a need for greater sub-group specificity about the types of regional FPCs. In practice, the category of "regional" may not be sufficiently precise to capture FPCs with consistent characteristics. For instance, FPCs that encompass a region surrounding and including a large urban core may exhibit characteristics that differ from FPCs encompassing rural areas. However, neither the questions in the census nor the size of the population being studied permit this analysis to differentiate these potential sub-types of regional FPC. Thus, greater attention to types of regional FPCs could be an area for further empirical exploration going forward.

14. For further discussion of why regional FPCs work on economic development see; Ruhf, K. Z. and K. Clancy (2022). *A Regional Imperative: The Case for Regional Food Systems* Thomas A. Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems, pgs. xvii,32,61,78,90-91,145,147,152,184-185,189-191.

A related explanation for response variability stems from the high degree of churn within the sample population captured by these census years. This population contains a significant amount of turnover, for a variety of potential reasons previously discussed. It follows that sample-level response variability would be impacted by this population turnover. However, to the extent that that population turnover accounts for response variability, it would also suggest a significant degree of variability among regional FPCs. While regional councils exhibit several consistent characteristics — such as a greater emphasis on topics such as economic development — this explanation for response variability would suggest that regional councils overall exhibit a high degree of contextual specificity.

A final potential explanation for response variability in this directory stems from the self-report nature of the questionnaire. Moreover, it is possible that a different person responded on behalf of these councils over the course of the years captured by the census. Thus, response variability — particularly for factors that are not explicit/objectively identifiable — such as identifying the top three council policy priorities — may be subject to respondent interpretation.

CONCLUSION

Regional FPCs represent a new, but growing movement toward regionalized approaches to multi-stakeholder governance in public decision-making processes. While multi-stakeholder approaches to governance such as FPCs have been developing and well-studied in recent decades, regional FPCs are less well understood. Regional approaches to governance, however, have unique demands compared to other types of FPC governance scales. This report provides a preliminary exploration of key characteristics of regional FPCs and offers important insights into how they compare to FPCs of other geographic scales.

Further research, however, is needed to better understand the characteristics and operation of regional FPCs. One potentially fruitful area for further research would be further exploration of how regional FPCs may manifest depending on the characteristics of their region. A scoping review of regional governance more broadly suggests that, while regions are not frequently defined, they tend to manifest in a variety of notable forms, including regions centered around cities, rural agglomeration regions, etc. No research to date has explored sub-group types of regional FPCs to see how these regional entities manifest and behave depending on the nature of their region. Further analysis of potential types of regional FPCs may provide clearer insight into the trends, characteristics, and needs of specific types of regional FPCs.

Analysis of geographic types of regional FPCs could also aid regional FPCs in better clarifying the bounds of their work. The turnover that is

observed and discussed in this analysis reflects qualitative observations of partnering FPCs in the community of practice who describe high levels of uncertainty and evolution as they try to establish clearer roles and guidelines for themselves. This turnover, along with the uncertainty described by partnering FPCs, is in part due to uncertainty about what constitutes a “region” and how to define the region encompassed by an FPC. Further work to clarify how to conceptualize regional work would aid both empirical understanding and administration on regional FPCs.¹⁵

Finally, further research is needed to understand the extent to which FPCs, of all scales, but specifically regional councils, engage in policy work. Current research, based on analysis of annual surveys of FPCs, sheds light on the policy issues that are high priority for councils. Yet, the extent and the manner by which councils engage in advocating for policy change is still not fully understood. Further research would help understand how councils engage in advocating for policy priorities and how this work can be supported.

15. For further discussion of the characteristics of potentially successful regional FPCs see; Ruhf, K. Z. and K. Clancy (2022). *A Regional Imperative: The Case for Regional Food Systems* Thomas A. Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems, pgs. 19-20,54-56,59-60,112-118,127,131-132,134-135,163-164,168-169,174,176-178,197-199,202-204.