

Cass Clay Food Partners: A networked response to COVID-19

SPECIAL ISSUE COSPONSORED BY INFAS:
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FOOD SYSTEMS

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Abstract

The Cass Clay Food Partners is a network of professionals, stakeholders, and residents serving Cass County, North Dakota, and Clay County, Minnesota, in creating a healthier, more just local

food system. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Cass Clay Food Partners quickly implemented a multipronged response that leveraged three critical assets of our network: (1) our unique structure, (2) our nuanced understanding of the social ties across overlapping networks, and (3) our ability to quickly

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pivot our work to address community needs. In this paper, we describe how our network responded to both the challenges and opportunities presented to our food system by the COVID-19 crisis. We also provide tools and recommendations for other food policy and food network practitioners.

Keywords

Food Network, Food Policy Council, Food Governance, Urban Agriculture Ordinance, COVID-19, Pandemic

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed fissures in the global food system and supply chains, negatively affecting vulnerable populations (Aday & Aday, 2020). Food insecurity, for example, affected 13.6% of U.S. households with children before the pandemic, and increased to 27.5% of families in June of 2020 (Silva, 2020). As the Cass-Clay region of North Dakota and Minnesota became a COVID-19 hotspot during the summer and fall of 2020, community leaders and policy-makers came together to support the local food system in order to bolster the physical health and mental well-being of residents during the pandemic.

In this paper, we draw on the perspectives of leaders from one network in particular—the Cass Clay Food Partners (CCFP)—to describe how our work changed to meet emerging food system needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. We offer our reflections on the successes and challenges we experienced between March and December 2020, and provide recommendations related to the tools and assets we had in place before the pandemic that enabled us to implement a robust response. We build on

existing literature about other food networks and networking mapping—especially social network analysis (SNA)—through an in-depth case study demonstrating how policy-focused SNA can inform how food networks respond to a crisis in the food system.

CCFP operates in the fertile Red River Valley of Minnesota and North Dakota, in a northern Midwestern landscape dominated by conventional agriculture, including world class sugar beet production. Our network is considered multijurisdictional because it encompasses five municipalities (see Figure 1), as well as the governing bodies of Clay County, Minnesota, and Cass County, North Dakota. The combined Metropolitan Statistical Area population for the region was estimated to be 257,000 in 2019 with the largest regional population centers of Fargo at 124,662, West Fargo at 38,718, and Moorhead at 44,753. The “Fargo-Moorhead” community, as it is commonly referred to as, is a major population center in the region.

CCFP can be best described as a network of networks (Figure 2). As detailed by Gold and Harden (2018), the purpose and structure of the network has evolved significantly over 10 years in a constant rebalancing of grassroots and top-down food systems change efforts. The CCFP is designed to bring together representatives of

Figure 1. The Fargo-Moorhead Metropolitan Area Developed by the Metropolitan Council of Governments (MetroCOG)

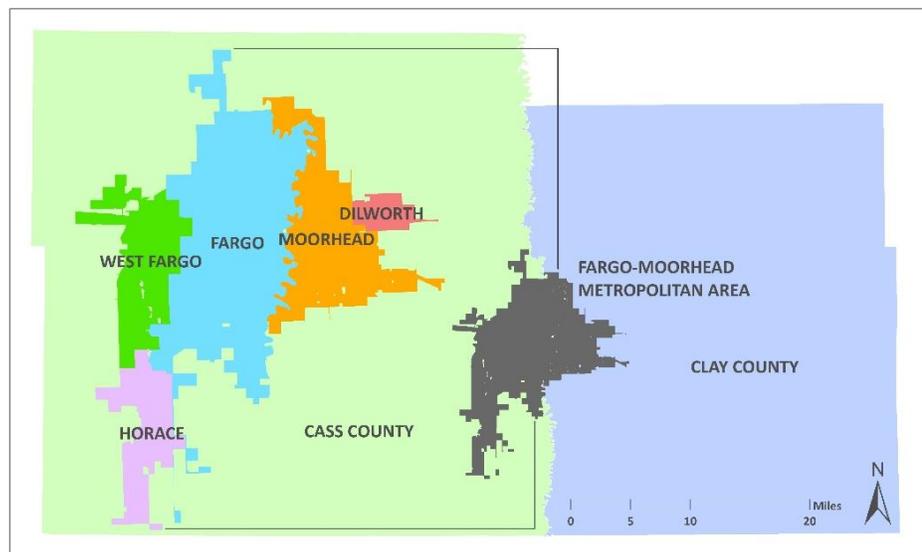
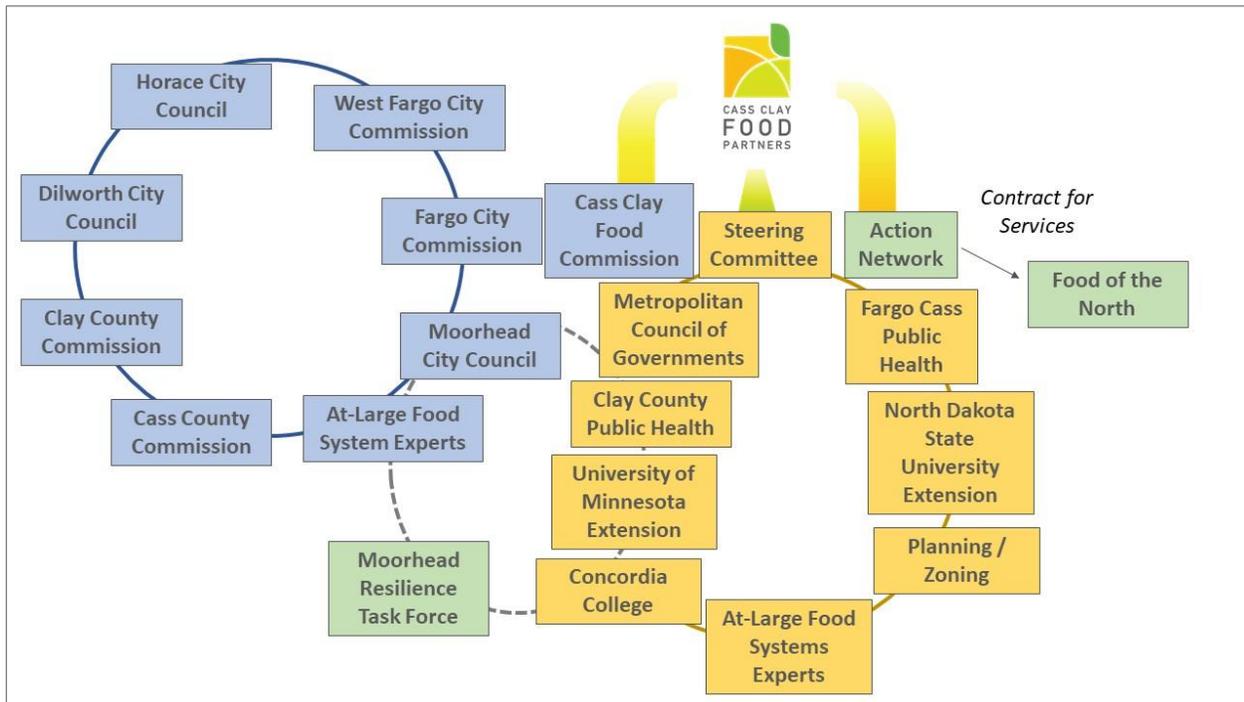


Figure 2. Network Map of Cass Clay Food Partners, Including the Steering Committee (Yellow), the Food Commission (Blue), and Partner Networks (Green)



organizations like public health, Cooperative Extension, and planning, while also tapping into other existing cross-sector networks like Food of the North and the Moorhead Resilience Task Force. Our network is organized around three main components that form a web of relationships across the Fargo-Moorhead region: a steering committee, the Cass Clay Food Commission, and the Action Network.

The leadership of CCFP is embedded within both local government and academia. Our steering committee is the core of the network and is led by two co-chairs from Fargo Cass Public Health and University of Minnesota Extension (staffing the network as part of their regular duties in their respective organizations), with less than US\$10,000 in financial support from the state of North Dakota. Network funding is used to contract for staff services from the Metropolitan Council of Governments (MetroCOG) and for community engagement with a nonprofit, Food of the North. The steering members set the agenda for Food Commission meetings and serve in an *ex officio* (nonvoting) capacity.

The Food Commission is an advising body formed through a Joint Powers Agreement between the City of Fargo, Clay County, and the five other governing jurisdictions included in the CCFP region. In addition to one elected representative selected internally by the seven local governing bodies, there are also six at-large members who serve on the Food Commission who are selected through an application process administered by the steering committee. The Food of the North is a separate nonprofit organization that executes a paid contract from the Cass Clay Food Partners to fulfill the deliverables of the Action Network. In this paper, we also discuss the Moorhead Resilience Task Force as a critical partner network during the COVID-19 pandemic, though it is not formally contained in our network structure.

As described by Gold and Harden (2018), CCFP strengthens connections between community leaders, elected officials, local government, urban planners, and the public to implement policies that support community food resilience by increasing local food production and creating a healthier, more sustainable, and more just food

environment. Since 2015, the network has focused on research briefs and policy blueprints (City of Fargo, 2020a), approved by the Food Commission that cover a range of food topics including:

- Urban agriculture and gardening (2015–2016)
- Healthy food access and environments (2017–2018)
- Environmental sustainability and agroecology (2019–2020)
- Integration of food systems research into local planning efforts (2021–2022)

Beginning in March 2020, COVID-19 presented new challenges to CCFP's established work, resulting in new or strengthened opportunities to address community needs through a networked approach. In this paper, we describe this response, highlighting lessons learned about the strengths and weaknesses of our network as we attempted to address new food systems stressors brought on by the pandemic. We share tools and highlight assets that were useful to our network and community during the pandemic, concluding with recommendations for steps that food networks and food policy councils can take now to be better prepared to respond to future disruptions to food system resilience.

Literature

The global pandemic could double the number of people worldwide experiencing acute food insecurity, with a disproportionate impact on vulnerable populations such as children and historically marginalized groups (Silva, 2020). Food networks and policy councils like CCFP are positioned to act locally to play a role in addressing food insecurity through informed governance and substantive organizational collaboration (Carboni, Siddiki, Koski, & Sadiq, 2017). While government and nonprofit actors like food banks focus, by necessity, on operations and meeting immediate community needs during a crisis, food policy councils take on important secondary functions like sharing information, amplifying communication across multiple networks, and proactively advancing mid- to long-term strategies for co-creating a more

resilient food system with the community (Guarino, Windings, & Endres, 2020).

A food policy council (FPC) is a type of food network that seeks to change food-related policies in a defined geographic community (Schiff, 2007). The strength of an FPC rests on the connections between members, which combine to form a network map based on relationships and shared purpose that can be visualized and measured using social network analysis (SNA) to map the connectedness of members and stakeholders of FPCs (Ohio Food Policy Network [OFPN], 2017). SNA can transform knowledge about the underlying structure of a network and can help leaders identify key actors who can move initiatives forward based on how many interpersonal connections and the type of connections that actors have to each other (Wasserman & Faust, 1994).

When creating an FPC or other food system coalition, SNA can help determine which individuals in a community should be brought together for grassroots efforts to tap into the politics at play (Freedman & Bess, 2011; Hauck, Schmidt, & Werner, 2016; Moragues-Faus & Sonnino, 2019). SNA can be used by networks for evaluation, to operationalize inclusivity, to drive social movements, and/or to bring diverse stakeholders together for creative problem-solving during a crisis (Carboni et al., 2017; Saunders, 2007). Studying FPC characteristics through SNA can determine what makes a successful and high-functioning network (Dharmawan, 2015). The research literature overall points to limited use of SNA by FPCs, and little existing evidence of SNA analysis being used to drive policy conversations between decision-makers in a food policy network who are connected to each other in specific ways.

FPCs across the United States responded to COVID-19 in a multitude of ways that demonstrate their unique ability to leverage connections and apply knowledge of food supply chains and systemic drivers of food inequities (Palmer et al., 2020). State and local government took immediate policy action in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, sometimes with support of FPCs, to establish a variety of food-related businesses as essential services, regulate food pricing, manage supply chains, procure food for emergency needs, support

food assistance programs, and other actions to support healthy food access (Healthy Food Policy Project [HFPP], n.d.). In Madison, Wisconsin, for example, the city partnered with the Madison Food Policy Council to allocate US\$50,000 in seed funding to projects supporting food education, access, and security (HFPP, n.d.). In larger cities, including Atlanta, Georgia, and Columbus, Ohio, local government allocated additional funding for food support programs for vulnerable populations like seniors and children (HFPP, n.d.).

In contrast, CCFP responded to the pandemic through secondary FPC functions such as communication, network weaving, and support for expanding on policy work related to local food production. As experienced elsewhere in the United States, community gardening and urban agriculture have gained traction in the Fargo-Moorhead metropolitan area as a central strategy to promote equitable access and food justice for residents, particularly those of BIPOC (black, indigenous, and people of color) communities. Glowa (2017), for example, has described gardening in cities like Oakland, California, as “one response from communities facing food injustices within urban neoliberal regimes” (p. 235). In 2020, CCFP continued to pursue strategies like urban agriculture policies as part of broad, ongoing efforts to increase food justice, with a heightened sense of urgency brought on the concurrent crises of COVID-19 and racial equity efforts as described by Palmer et al. (2020). This paper demonstrates how CCFP, equipped with a policy-focused SNA and an ability to tap into overlapping networks, successfully implemented a robust local, equity-driven response to community food resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

In this paper, we use qualitative methods to construct a narrative reflection on our experience in responding to food system challenges during COVID-19 between March and December 2020, written by our steering committee members and other network leaders most actively involved in this work. We draw on our minutes from public meetings, articles, and letters in the local newspaper (the *Fargo Forum*), and many forms of informal com-

munications (email and phone calls) that have guided our decisions during the pandemic. We also present information from an SNA conducted before COVID-19, the results of which provided insights that informed our policy response to the pandemic.

Social Network Analysis Pre-COVID

In the spring of 2019, North Dakota State University conducted a social network analysis (SNA) examining the relationships across the leadership of CCFP and the seven local government bodies that our network serves (Figure 1). An online survey was distributed to a pool of 68 people, including elected officials and key administrators in each policy jurisdiction, citizen at-large members of the Cass Clay Food Commission, one leader from Food of the North (representing the CCFP Action Network), and members of the CCFP steering committee. Fifty-three people responded to the survey. The survey asked respondents to review a list of the individual names of the other survey respondents, and indicate which option best described how they interacted with each person specifically regarding food policy issues in Cass and Clay counties. The options were:

- No interaction.
- We communicate. We exchange ideas and information.
- We cooperate. We have independent goals and agree not to interfere with each other.
- We coordinate. We coordinate our work to achieve a common goal.
- We collaborate. We work or have worked together to create something new that neither of us could have created on our own.

The scale used for the level of connections was based on the four Cs of interorganizational partnering: communication, cooperation, coordination, and collaboration (Martin, Nolte, & Vitolo, 2016). The four Cs represent a continuum of increased interorganizational “embeddedness in partnering activities” (Martin et al., 2016, p. 621), so they work well as a scale to indicate strength of connection between the policy jurisdictions and the leadership of the CCFP. The survey results were analyzed

using the social network analysis software InFlow (Orgnet, n.d.), which allowed researchers to create maps showing the connections between individuals in the survey pool and the level of each connection. These maps contain both nonrespondents and respondents. Nonrespondents were represented in the map only if one of the respondents indicated a relationship with them (see Figure 3).

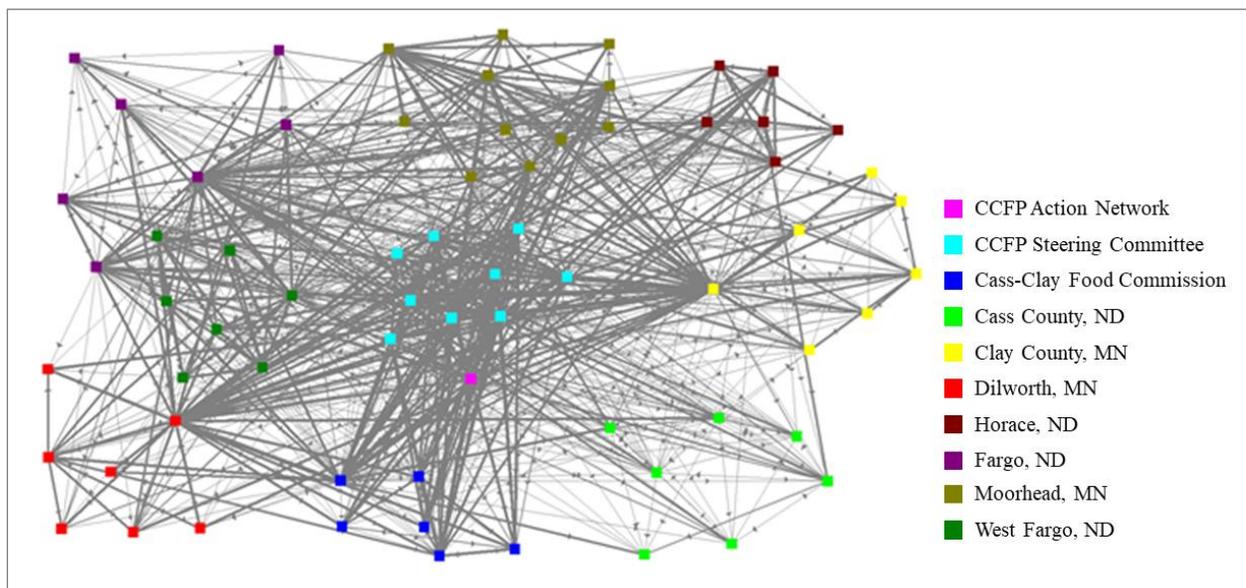
Statistical analysis of the survey results indicated the connections across this network of potential food policy influences were relatively sparse. Of 4,556 potential ties, the network had 1,055 actual ties, indicating a density of 23.2%. The average path length (the average number of steps on the shortest path between any two nodes) was 2.18. The shortest possible average path length of a network is 1, while the longest possible average path length of the network in this study is its diameter of 4. While the average path length of the CCFP network may seem short, it is not far below the median of the range of possible average path lengths. Shorter average path lengths have been associated with more efficient diffusion of information (Leavitt, 1951) and innovations (Peres, 2014) across a network.

The SNA revealed a lack of connections, especially at the “we coordinate” and “we collaborate” levels between some policy jurisdictions and CCFP leadership. The SNA also revealed few connections related to food policy within certain jurisdictions. The SNA results further demonstrated the lack of collaboration between planning departments in the jurisdictions. For example, there were no “we collaborate” ties indicated between individuals in the Moorhead policy jurisdiction and the Fargo policy jurisdiction. There was only one, asymmetrical “we coordinate” tie between Moorhead and Fargo. Thus, the SNA showed little evidence of coordination or collaboration on food policy *between* policy jurisdictions. The weaknesses within our network exposed by the SNA helped us understand why we were not influencing decision-makers, at least not in a way that was producing new policies or policy changes, aside from one back-yard chicken ordinance adopted in Fargo in 2017.

Based on this more nuanced understanding of our network, the CCFP developed a plan to intentionally engage key decision-makers in each of our seven jurisdictions. The map included the identification of conversation “clusters,” or combinations

Figure 3. Social Network Analysis of Cass Clay Food Partners and Local Governing Bodies

Each colored square (node) in this map represents a person in the survey pool and is color-coded to indicate affiliation with a policy jurisdiction or CCFP. The lines between the nodes indicate connections, with thicker lines representing higher-level connections. The arrows on each line represent the direction of the indicated connection. Lines with arrows in both directions indicate symmetric connections in which each respondent indicated the same level of connection with the other.



of individuals from each jurisdiction and the steering committee selected based on (1) ability to influence food policy decisions, and (2) pre-existing relationships that could be leveraged. The seven-jurisdiction outreach process was just beginning in March 2020. Although the SNA was not designed as a response to COVID-19, the analysis and resulting outreach plan were useful tools as we launched a body of new pandemic response work beginning in March 2020, which ultimately built upon and replaced the outreach plan designed around the SNA analysis.

Results

Activating Our Network of Networks to Respond to COVID

Community food resource list

Beginning in March 2020, the CCFP embraced several new actions to respond to the effect of COVID-19 on our food system (see Figure 4). Our first step was to quickly compile a crowd-sourced, open-access community food resource list that provided critical information to residents and service organizations in real time (City of Fargo, 2020d), brought community attention to immediate issues

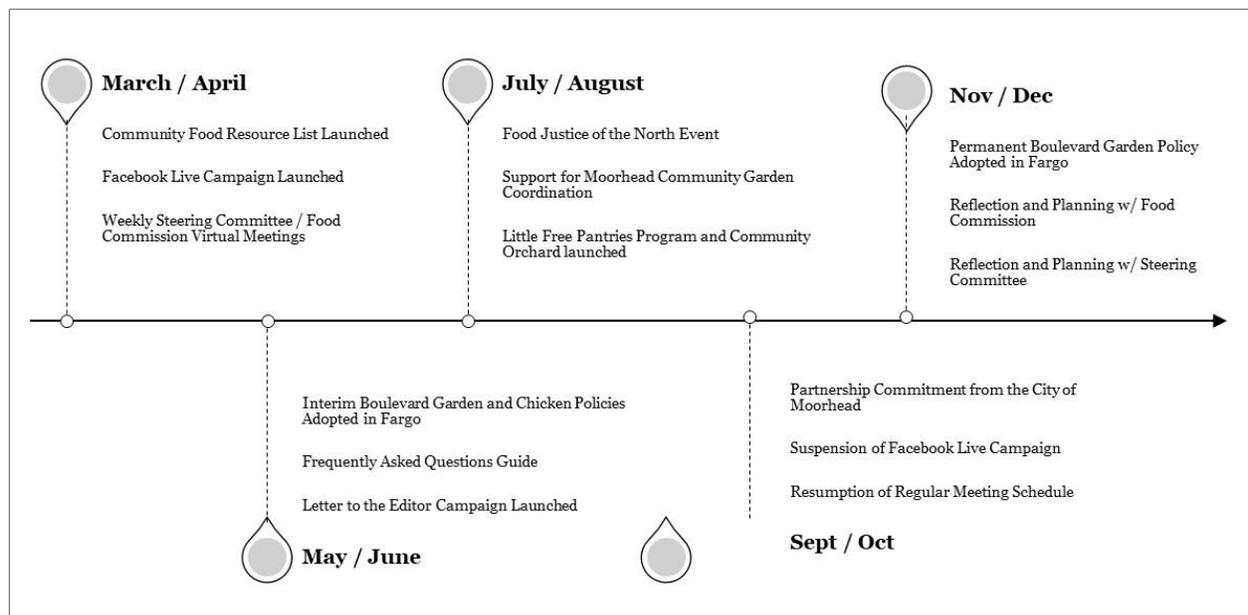
and CCFP efforts related to food access (Amundson, 2020e), and served as a call to action for network leaders to come together to begin weekly meetings to share and address emergent needs.

Facebook Live campaign

During the first steering committee meeting to address COVID-19 challenges, we decided to launch a series of video updates through social media at the end of March 2020, using an established (but infrequently used) Facebook page (CCFP, n.d.). These updates enabled our network to efficiently share information about the rapidly changing food environment during the pandemic, including emergency food sources and grocery delivery options, and created an opportunity to educate the public about broad systemic challenges like meat processing and food justice. The five most popular (i.e., widely viewed) topics included:

- Emergency food resources in the community
- Federal and state food support programs
- Local grocery delivery options
- Little Free Pantry Program launch
- Frequently Asked Questions Guide public launch

Figure 4. Timeline of COVID-19–related Cass Clay Food Partners’ Activities, March–December 2020



The campaign was managed using a shared Google document file and by granting administrative privileges to the page to more than a dozen network members. One steering committee member coordinated this effort, writing 121 pages of script for the Facebook Live broadcasts. Social media engagement also enabled residents to send questions or share posted information with friends, family, and neighbors. The Facebook Live campaign helped increase our presence—measured by the number of “likes” on our page—by 72% (from 581 to 803).

Qualitatively, the online presence increased engagement with our network, enabling residents who had never participated before to contribute meaningful ideas, such as identifying potential new partnerships. For example, one resident of Moorhead reached out through a comment on Facebook Live to share additional emergency food resources, which led us to partner with that resident for regular updates to our community food resource list. In another case, a local produce farmer contacted us to ask for help with determining whether he could legally set up a farm stand in Moorhead. We were able to serve as a bridge between the farmer and the city planning department to ensure the farm stand was properly permitted.

Virtual events

Leveraging CCFP’s Action Network was also a key element of our COVID-19 response. Since 2018, CCFP has contracted with a separate organization—Food of the North—to serve as the action network by fostering a grassroots organizing space for CCFP. This function has primarily occurred through a monthly event, First Fridays, that brings together community members, food network leaders, and area decision-makers for learning and networking. The event also generates interest around the food policy related work spearheaded by CCFP (Food of the North, n.d.-a).

At the start of COVID-19, First Fridays shifted to a virtual format and pivoted the April 2020 topic to focus on the Cass and Clay counties’ community response and needs related to the pandemic. This event featured a leader from the Great Plains Food Bank (which serves all of North Dakota and Clay County, Minnesota), a local res-

taurateur, and a member of the CCFP steering committee. This conversation illuminated the many challenges in our local, regional, and national food system, and proposed food system alternatives that have been promoted by CCFP for nearly a decade, including a more local and regionalized approach to food production. All First Friday virtual events during 2020 included an update and call to action from CCFP, which helped to further increase our support and grassroots advocacy from the community.

Comprehensive Communication Strategy

During COVID-19, CCFP and Food of the North found new ways to leverage each network’s focus (policy and grassroots engagement, respectively) to build a more cohesive network communication strategy. CCFP and Food of the North launched a newspaper letter-writing campaign to garner support for urban agriculture initiatives in Cass and Clay counties. Throughout the summer, nine letters to the editor were published in the *Fargo Forum* articulating various reasons that area residents appreciated expanded urban agriculture practices, like the new boulevard garden policy in Fargo, and desired to see more. Many referred to concerns over stability in the U.S. food supply because of COVID-19 and a need for more personal autonomy in their food production. Food of the North and CCFP also collaborated to clarify local food policies for residents through the combined efforts of the CCFP steering committee in communications with local government, and the user-friendly website launched by Food of the North during the pandemic (Food of the North, n.d.-b).

Partnering for Food Resilience

CCFP also used its influence to help other community-based networks adapt to the challenges posed by COVID-19. This approach of “network weaving” creates opportunities to amplify connected work (Holley, 2012). CCFP’s work with the Moorhead Resilience Task Force (MRTF) illustrates the collaborative power of having multiple networks work on issues affecting food systems. The MRTF is a coalition that seeks to address climate and social resilience through an array of strategies, with involvement from local elected officials, commu-

nity leaders, academics, and representatives of business and public service entities. The CCFP has strong representation on the MRTF. The existing synergies between these two groups were instrumental in helping MRTF respond to the crises caused by COVID-19 and engage in longer-term planning.

In response to COVID-19, CCFP helped the MRTF create tangible projects to address pressing community problems. As the disruptions to the food chain became apparent in the early days of the pandemic, members of the CCFP were able to tap into their collective expertise and social networks to identify problems in the local supply of fresh produce, and to address these by expanding community gardens in Moorhead. CCFP collaborated to help establish a new paid position within the MRTF, the Moorhead Community Garden Coordinator. This position has provided critical support to help one garden program continue during 2020, and to help two gardens expand their size to grow more produce for community members in need.

In the long term, CCFP provided guidance on how to leverage communitywide networks to create lasting changes. As the MRTF began the work of analyzing Moorhead's current assets and vulnerabilities, CCFP provided concrete information about where the community stands, what has been attempted in the past, and where the MRTF should put its resources. Given CCFP's history of work in the community, we helped the MRTF think more seriously about the long-term impacts of their work, particularly in relation to policies surrounding food security. From this encouragement and the knowledge that CCFP provided, the MRTF has shaped its action plan to address areas of overlapping interest and has chosen to focus on policy changes to further these goals.

Efforts to activate our network of networks helped the CCFP build a stronger voice in the community. However, the strain of this commitment over the course of months, on top of the personal and professional challenges brought on by the pandemic, whittled away at our network's capacity to embrace our new role in the spotlight. Therefore, it may be more significant that three partnering networks—CCFP, Food of the North,

and the Moorhead Resilience Task Force—established new modes of working together and sharing in operational tasks like communication (such as the letter-writing campaign) and influencing local decision-making in order to build future awareness of the food system (such as leveraging the Virtual First Friday events to encourage engagement around policy issues). An area of future growth is to secure funding for a full-time food systems coordinator for the CCFP, a position that could be shared across multiple networks working toward a common purpose.

Innovating Across Boundaries

Decentralized Emergency Food Distribution

The weekly virtual CCFP meetings during the pandemic helped incubate new initiatives led by steering committee members as part of their own professional pandemic response. A CCFP steering committee member from North Dakota State University (NDSU) Extension learned of the high rate of demand for mobile food pantries due to COVID, with a 79% increase reported statewide in North Dakota in summer 2020 (Great Plains Food Bank, 2020). After investigating the issue, she brought an idea to the steering committee to replicate a decentralized emergency food distribution program from other cities known as Little Free Pantries, which was officially launched in summer 2020.

A Little Free Pantry is a custom-built pantry or cabinet structure stocked with shelf-stable food and daily essentials. It operates under the motto, “take what you need, leave what you can.” Individuals in need are free to take from the pantry as they pass by. To date, six sites in the Fargo-Moorhead area have committed to hosting a pantry. CCFP's network created a viable avenue for vetting the idea, promoting this effort, and garnering support from local stakeholders and partnering organizations.

Community Orchard

CCFP members from NDSU Extension have also been successful in leveraging the community momentum around community-based agriculture in the aftermath of COVID-19. Members of the

steering committee secured a grant from the North Dakota state government during the summer of 2020 for the formation of a community orchard. The location of the orchard was selected due to the population currently facing poverty and marginalization residing in that area. The neighborhood is also home to several immigrant or refugee families. The community orchard thus helps to bridge the gap between food access and food justice for a population of residents who were also disproportionately impacted by the health and economic consequences of the pandemic.

The orchard grant included funding for outreach education to promote local food systems; staff time for planting, maintaining, and harvesting orchard produce; and educational resources about the importance of pollinators. Due to pandemic-related limitations in group gathering, educational efforts have centered on signage for community members to read when visiting the park. CCFP's network was again vital in the summer of 2020 in mobilizing multiple organizations and agencies to expand the orchard to include additional pollinator plantings and native berries. At full maturity, the orchard will produce an estimated US\$10,000 worth of produce per year which will be free and available to the public.

Equity event

The pandemic, as well as the anti-Black violence exposed by the murder of George Floyd, revealed major racial and economic inequities across social systems. CCFP, Food of the North, NDSU Extension, and University of Minnesota (UM) Extension hosted a virtual conversation in July 2020 to address food justice and equity issues related to both the pandemic and systemic racism. The event included speakers from UM Extension sharing stories and experiences from working on food justice and equitable access with diverse populations in Minnesota and was moderated by a North Dakota state legislator. Responses to the follow-up survey demonstrated that in the aftermath of the pandemic, participants wanted to see our community look at food justice on a more systemic level, create more opportunities for culturally based foods to be grown and distributed in the area, and make it easier for residents to produce their own food.

These three examples highlight the ways that members of the CCFP network came together in new ways to address emergent issues in the local food system through new projects and initiatives to support food security, improve access to locally grown fruit, and raise awareness about social justice issues in the food system all as part of a systemic response to the pandemic. We acknowledge that these efforts alone are not enough to counter the effects that COVID-19 has had on our food system, economic health, and mental well-being, and that our intent as a network is to focus on policy efforts that support the broader systemic changes needed to create a more equitable and healthy food system (Gold & Harden, 2018).

Translating and Changing Policy

Bridging Role in Food Policy and Planning

Through our expanded communications efforts during COVID-19, we began to gain more support from city and county government, including both employees and elected officials. In turn, we became more effective in advocating for clarity around existing policies. For example, a staff person from the city of Moorhead began participating in our virtual weekly Cass Clay Food Commission meetings and was instrumental in ensuring that we received prompt responses during the development of our frequently asked questions guide. The FAQ guide provided residents of all of our jurisdictions with a simple factsheet to navigate complex city codes related to gardening and urban agriculture, such as “Can I garden in my boulevard?” or “Can I raise chickens on residential property?” (City of Fargo, 2020c). We also worked with city staff in Fargo to confirm that beekeeping is allowed within city limits for personal use (which previously had been addressed in an ambiguous case-by-case basis requiring residents to contact the city directly). These two examples demonstrate how our network helped residents more easily understand and navigate city codes and legal interpretations related to food.

Urban Agriculture Ordinances

In the city of Fargo, our network also championed two temporary ordinance changes in response to

COVID-19 aimed at expanding residents' ability to produce their own food and to partake in the mental and physical health benefits of gardening while social distancing. Both were successfully passed in the spring of 2020, although not without controversy. The first was an expansion of the backyard chicken program to allow an increase in the number of chickens allowed from four to six (City of Fargo, 2020e). The second policy was a new program allowing residents to grow food and flower gardens in the boulevard adjacent to their residential property (City of Fargo, 2020b). Both policies were approved, with a 3-2 vote on chickens (Amundson, 2020a) and a 4-1 vote on boulevard gardens (Amundson, 2020b).

There are three key reasons we were successful in these policy efforts: (1) the power we built during COVID-19 as a network, (2) having a champion within the Fargo City Commission, and (3) our nuanced understanding of the relationships across city staff and of the relationships across the city commission provided by the SNA. When the Cass Clay Food Commission was first formed, it was with the intent to introduce more regional uniformity in the adoption of food-related policies across the Cass Clay region. In other words, we had hoped that if one jurisdiction adopted a new ordinance, the others would learn from that experience and consider making similar changes. As the SNA revealed, this would not happen as naturally as we had previously thought. The boulevard garden policy in Fargo was likely only modeled after the one in Moorhead because of our role as a bridge between the two communities. By making this connection between the jurisdictions, we were able to leverage what we had learned in the SNA (weak connections across jurisdictions) to help shape our policy approach during COVID-19.

Challenges to our Policy Advocacy during COVID-19

Because the new boulevard garden program was introduced early in the pandemic (May 2020), commissioners questioned whether this was the right time to use city staff time or financial resources to create a new program that would only be temporary and would have minimal impact on food security. One commissioner even called the effort "ridiculous" and "a waste of our time"

(Amundson, 2020d, para. 10–12). There was some validity to these critiques; only three families in Fargo ended up implementing the boulevard gardening program in 2020. While the program did not bear any direct costs or require budget allocations, it did require some dedicated staff time (approximately value of US\$775) that had to be provided through one of our network leaders as part of her duties in the public health department.

We also were caught off guard by vocal opposition from individuals with associations to the NDSU Extension Master Gardener program. Proponents (some of whom were also connected with Master Gardeners) expressed a desire to see more gardens throughout the community, while opponents were concerned that boulevards (typically adjacent to a street) would not provide a suitable growing environment, especially for vegetables intended for human consumption. Our network addressed these latter concerns by including information to program participants for mitigating soil contamination in boulevard gardens.

Despite these challenges to the new program, in December 2020, the Fargo City Commission voted 5-0 to make the boulevard garden program permanent and requested that city staff explore opportunities to make the program more accessible to residents by reducing the administrative requirements (Amundson, 2020c). None of the city commissioners, including the one who had previously voted against the policy in May 2020, expressed any opposition to the program. In fact, the discussion around the issue was lighthearted and positive, suggesting that the timing of the matter and competing priorities in the first weeks of the pandemic were more likely the source of earlier opposition than politics. Or perhaps, after the weariness of the pandemic and burden of taking on more controversial topics like mask mandates, business shutdowns, and major budgetary decisions, expressing support for a low-risk gardening initiative was a much easier sell to city leaders, especially since there were minimal complaints about the program during the summer pilot.

Discussion

During COVID-19, our network successfully pivoted and increased our work to meet food access

and health challenges being experienced in our community. We were poised to take on this work because of 10 years of adaptive development that included ongoing evaluation and tools like SNA that we used to systematically analyze and respond to the strengths and weaknesses of our network. These successes included an increase in public support and engagement, online resources that provided help to residents during the pandemic, new programs related to emergency food and community-based agriculture, and policy changes in the city of Fargo. Our work during the pandemic also strengthened the relationships across key food policy actors in our region.

Throughout this paper, we have highlighted how SNA conducted before COVID-19 enabled our network to be poised to act and leverage key relationships with local policy-makers and planning departments. While other food networks have used SNA to gain a broader understanding of all the key players in a geographically defined food system (e.g., Dharmawan, 2015; OFPN, 2017), our experience highlights how SNA focusing on the food policy arena, and including stakeholders not directly involved in food systems work (e.g., elected officials not serving on the Food Commission), can inform advocacy efforts. We also have demonstrated that our response to the global pandemic required quick action informed by a solid grasp of how and who makes decisions; therefore, network leaders are best served if they implement some form of network mapping on a regular basis (annually or biannually), so they are poised with a nuanced understanding of decision-making structures and relationships before a crisis ensues.

As discussed in the commentary by Palmer et al. (2020), FPCs in 2020 have leaned into new roles to address the *concurrent* crises of the year: a pandemic compounded by issues of racial inequity. For food system practitioners, this has brought heightened attention to food justice as a body of work that addresses economic, racial, and other systemic disparities that limit residents' ability to access or produce healthy, culturally based food. While CCFP's work has included equity as a core value since 2017 (Gold & Harden, 2018), network leaders were able to communicate more publicly about social issues than in the past due to the relatively

conservative political and cultural context in the Cass Clay region. The Food Justice of the North equity event represented a milestone for CCFP in terms of our network's first public discussion about how structural racism shapes our local food system. Future work for our network lies in accountability measures for equity and inclusion in our network and in the Food Commission work. As Carboni et al. (2017) have found, SNA presents a tool for our network and other FPCs to develop a baseline understanding of how the governance process around food policy often precludes meaningful involvement from marginalized groups.

In our community, urban agriculture and community gardens are central to food justice efforts because many immigrant and refugee families have the skills, knowledge, and desire to produce their own food, but are unable to access land and other essential resources. Nevertheless, a classist undercurrent of the resistance to urban agriculture policies is sometimes presented as an attitude that agriculture should only be in the countryside, not in the city. One commissioner stated this sentiment clearly during one of the discussions of the boulevard garden policy: "We live in North Dakota. You go about two miles out there and there's unlimited farmland. This isn't Manhattan" (Amundson, 2020d, para. 10). This paradigm assumes that anyone can afford to purchase, rent, or otherwise access farmland or products grown on nearby farms, ignoring the economic and social realities of most residents, especially those facing food insecurity or representing historically marginalized groups.

Furthermore, this disdain for agriculture within the city limits by those who do not face food security challenges themselves is laden with tensions between competing "land politics," with the institutionalization of private property rights, racial exclusion, neoliberal governance on the one side, and collective food sovereignty, social equity, and re-envisioned public land usage on the other (Glowa, 2017, p. 232). The COVID-19 pandemic has created opportunities for food networks to help community leaders to deconstruct this dichotomous land politic as the public consciousness has shifted to be more supportive of urban food production systems, and of the social injustices that these systems often seek to help resolve.

Recommendations for Other Food Network Leaders

As we have reflected on this body of work in 2020, we offer recommendations to leaders of food networks and FPCs. In our network, we have adopted a practice of regularly debriefing with one another to process next steps, celebrate victories, and reflect on lessons learned. During the first three months of the pandemic, the network co-chairs were in contact almost daily to stay abreast of the changing food system dynamics and the network's increased workload, and to reflect on longer-term strategies to leverage our strengthened platform. In November and December 2020, both the Food Commission and steering committee engaged in facilitated dialogue to dissect the accomplishments of the year and look ahead to the next two years of work. Given this time and mental space to reflect on our pandemic response, we offer five recommendations to other food system change agents.

Learn Your Network Now

Before COVID-19, to better understand and communicate with key stakeholders in our network, our network invested in four types of engagement activities, including:

- Community surveys and engagement events,
- Food system planning with the Metropolitan Council of Governments,
- Strategic communication development with a paid consultant, and
- Social Network Analysis of policymakers and other key stakeholders.

We recommend that network leaders start with using simple tools like online surveys and conversations with friendly policy-makers to get a regular pulse of the community's level of support for food policy issues. Networks maps and flowcharts (such as Figure 2) can be instructive in identifying gaps and potential partnership and are less intensive to implement than SNA. Our SNA ended up being a very useful tool for two primary reasons. First, we focused on mapping political relationships and leverage points versus a map of our entire food network or local food system. Second, the timing of our SNA analysis and follow-up communications

coincided with the start of the pandemic in such a way that we were able to pivot and use our SNA results to inform our COVID-19 response while they were still relatively current.

Invest in Small, Immediate Wins

Our network's pandemic response began humbly, with one leader identifying a need for a comprehensive food resource list, creating a document to fill that need, and sharing it immediately with other network leaders for input and to avoid duplicative work. When this resource received coverage from local media and was widely shared across multiple networks, it activated not only our network members but also generated a much greater level of engagement with the community. By leveraging an early success to build credibility and community support, CCFP was able to successfully advocate for policy changes in May and December 2020. We recommend that other networks leaders not overlook the value of small victories and the snowball effect of leveraging these victories to boost network visibility.

Help Emerging Leaders Shine

The pandemic created many new opportunities and increased the motivation for more of our CCFP network leaders to take on specific pieces of work such as communications, public relations, project development, and network weaving. Relatively simple, one-time tasks like delivering an update on Facebook Live or speaking with media could be easily delegated to steering committee members, Food Commission members, and student interns. Network leaders seemed to express a sense of benevolent self-interest in wanting to be able to pitch in and help the community during a time when volunteering in-person was often infeasible. The co-chairs of the network could then focus on policy proposals, communications management, and facilitation of network meetings.

We recommend that other leaders take time to invest the necessary time and energy in ensuring that emerging network leaders are comfortable and prepared when taking on new tasks. This entails coaching, developing scripts and talking points, phone calls, and troubleshooting technology. This time spent on minutia pays off even if the actual

time saved in the end is insignificant, because even the public perception of distributed leadership has inherent value in bolstering network credibility and reach. For example, having several well-equipped network spokespeople enables network leaders to delegate advocacy and public awareness efforts to the best messenger. Each time someone new delivered a Facebook Live update, our CCFP page received a significant bump in “likes” and “views.”

Become a Valuable Asset

Before the pandemic, the CCFP had spent five years producing evidence-based policy blueprints and other documents, vetted and approved in a formal process through the Food Commission. This work did not translate to policy change immediately, but over time left us poised to be a credible asset for local government and community members at a time when food system challenges became elevated in the public consciousness. Timing is imperative when engaging in policy work so that advocacy efforts can strengthen rather than diminish political capital. We recommend that food network leaders play the long game in system change efforts, investing in relationships, research, and communications, while recognizing when contexts in the community shift to create opportunities to present policy solutions. During the pandemic, our investments in relationships and research paid off when we received invitations to present ideas and solutions from within the Fargo City Commission and the Moorhead City Council.

Use a Holistic Humanistic Approach

In our politically bifurcated community, we have found that policy efforts around food and urban agriculture can often bring together the political right and left. Broad appeals to humanistic values—feeding hungry families, granting homeowners the freedom to produce their own food, supporting mental health through gardening—coupled

with practical insights on overcoming logistical hurdles and overhead costs create a compelling narrative that is difficult to refute. A powerful example of this type of appeal came from a Fargo city commissioner during the boulevard garden policy discussion in May, who described his support for the policy with this statement: “If you are hungry, it’s an emergency. ... We need to show that we are a community of compassion” (Amundson 2020a, para. 7–9).

When we returned to the Fargo City Commission in December prepared with more data on the program, not only was there no opposition, but the discussion around the policy change was met with humor and lightness that was not existent during most of the other discussion that evening. It was clear that what once was brushed off as a “feel good” measure had gained traction as a program with an undeniable public benefit. Our recommendation to fellow food network leaders is to recognize that humanistic appeals, especially when delivered by an effective messenger at the right time, are just as important as data and research in capturing the public’s imagination in way that influences policy-makers over time.

Conclusion

When COVID-19 threatened our community’s food system, CCFP answered the call to action. Our years of self-assessment, adaptive development, and attention to interwoven networks enabled us to act quickly to implement a mixture of effective strategies that no single organization, jurisdiction, or other entity could have accomplished alone. Despite the energy infused into our work during COVID-19, we have much more to accomplish to create a healthy, just, and equitable food system. We look forward to leveraging the power we have built to focus our efforts even more keenly on those who are most vulnerable and oppressed in our community.

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