Food Security: Rethinking Food Policy in Manitoba Through Public Participation

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Figure 1: South Osborne Farmers Market

Case-in-Point 2024

1.0 Introduction

Access to safe and nutritious food is a fundamental human right as it affects every individual and is an essential element of community self-reliance. Research on the growing risk of "disconnection" between government and citizens shows that citizens are increasingly concerned that their democratic institutions are out of sync with their values and interests (Lobe, 2005). After the National Food Assembly took place in Winnipeg, a call was made to create a Manitoba Food Charter. The pathway to creating the Food Charter took a lot of dedication and hard work from many different participants. Food Matters Manitoba is an organization that works to develop sustainable food systems in Manitoba. It is an outcome of collaboration and community engagement between Manitobans. Food Matters Manitoba describes food security as "an experience, and one that exists when all people have what they need to eat well all the time. This experience is unique to each person." However, this experience varies between individuals as everyone has different expectations and relationships with food (Food Matters Manitoba, 2024).

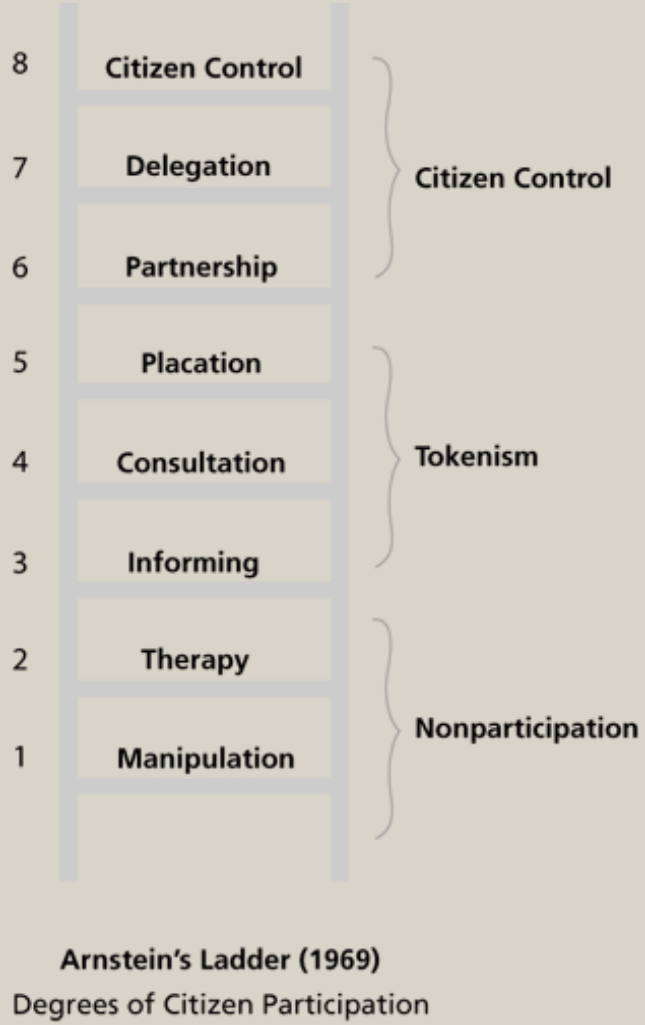


Figure 2: Arnstein's Ladder of Participation.

2.0 Background

In Canada, food banks have been the leading solution and response to food insecurity since the early 1980s (Lobe, 2005). However, this approach is seen as a short-term fix to a much broader issue of food security (Lobe, 2005). To address issues in the food system, a new long-term approach has emerged that broadens the scope of understanding (Lobe, 2005). The approach aims to re-examine who should be included in the discussions around food, because the food system affects everyone who eats food, they should have a say in shaping food policies (Lobe, 2005).

There is a growing demand for locally produced-food in Manitoba (Sivilay, 2019). This is evident by the increased number of farmers' markets, Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms, and small-scale farms that sell directly to consumers (Sivilay, 2019). However, due to government regulations and marketing board rules, farmers face obstacles such as the difficulty of producing produce that is in demand by local customers and accessing different and direct markets (Sivilay, 2019).

Public policy plays a significant role in how governments respond and think about issues that impact the health and well-being of communities (Lobe, 2005). Communities must understand the policy-making process (Lobe, 2005). Creating better public policy requires policymakers to work with communities to tap into their knowledge, experience, and diversity (Lobe, 2005). Public policy is in critical need of increased public participation because it serves as a guide and provides direction for decision-makers by reflecting the values, systems, and beliefs of the group that created it (Lobe, 2005). To ensure meaningful participation in this process, the public should identify the issues and continue participating by monitoring policy impacts (Lobe, 2005).

Food can uniquely connect people and build relationships with the land, neighbourhoods, and even policy makers by gathering people around the same table, working in the garden, or meeting local producers at a farmers' market (Lobe, 2005). It now become possible to understand how public participation and plays a role in policymaking, and how it relates to food (Lobe, 2005).

To engage the public in conversations there are several ways in which the public can be informed (Lobe, 2005). Arnstein's ladder has become the classic model for discussing participation as it is widely used and accepted in public engagement (Lobe, 2005). Figure 2 displays the different levels of participation. Participation ranges from informing the public to actually delegating the public decision-making power (Lobe, 2005).

3.0 Facts of the Case

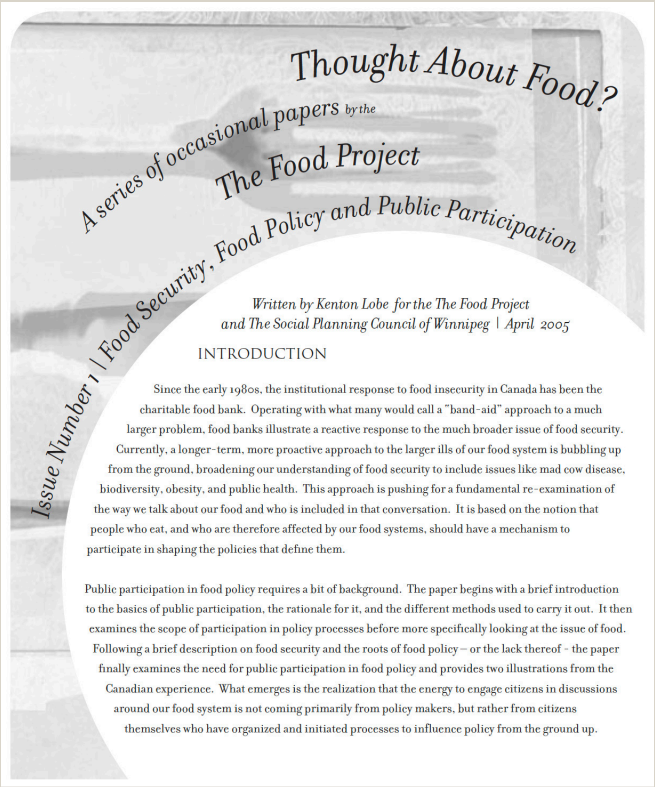
In October 2004, over 200 individuals gathered from across Canada at the National Food Security Assembly in Winnipeg (PHAC, 2005). The connection between food security and public policy was a critical work area that emerged from the Assembly (PHAC, 2005). A conversation between Manitobans emerged about how the province could move forward with the energy created from the Assembly, and one of the ideas was to explore a potential provincial food charter (PHAC, 2005). In the beginning, it was not clear what the project outcome was going to be or even what it aimed to achieve; the project began by engaging Manitobans. Since individuals and organizations seldom get included in food policy discussions, the food charter opened the door for community gardeners, food bank staff, community health workers and others (PHAC, 2005).

The following steps for the Local Organizing Committee were to gather Canadian experience from Toronto, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert regarding food charters for discussion at the next Manitoba meeting (PHAC, 2005). Food has the ability to bring people together and build relationships, be it with neighbours, land, or even policymakers (PHAC, 2005).

According to Kenton Lobe at the end of the Assembly, a group of 12-15 people worked together to organize sub-committees, bring food, and get speakers and keynotes, and out of that group, there was an individual who called for a bullseye committee. Kenton Lobe highlighted that a bullseye committee is known to planners and community developers as a participatory tool to set big goals and identify a shared space among the group of actors gathered. The Bullseye Committee was the bridge of energy from the national organization committee into the Manitoba Food Charter. The idea of developing a provincial charter and including Northern Manitobans and farmers arose during the end of the Assembly, which was encouraged by participants from Northern Manitoba (University of Toronto, 2012). The Local Organizing Committee for the Food Security Assembly agreed to draw from experience from around Canada (PHAC, 2005). Later, in 2005, the Bullseye Committee of the Food Charter Project began community consultations (University of Toronto, 2012). Also, during that time, the Social Planning Council and The Food Project requested Kenton Lobe, Co-Chair of the Food Charter, to write a food policy paper focusing on how to get dialogue to build a provincial food charter. In April 2005, the paper was published and titled *"Thought About Food? A Series of occasional papers by The Food Project: Issue Number 1 | Food Security, Food Policy, and Public Participation"*. (See Figure 3).

"We need to open up the process of setting food policies, globally, regionally, nationally, and locally. If we don't, we will be allowing other corporate identities to dominate and determine the shape of food policy."

- Tim Lang
Food Wars (2004)



Thought About Food?

A series of occasional papers by the

The Food Project

Issue Number 1 | Food Security, Food Policy and Public Participation

Written by Kenton Lobe for the The Food Project and The Social Planning Council of Winnipeg | April 2005

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1980s, the institutional response to food insecurity in Canada has been the charitable food bank. Operating with what many would call a "band-aid" approach to a much larger problem, food banks illustrate a reactive response to the much broader issue of food security. Currently, a longer-term, more proactive approach to the larger ills of our food system is bubbling up from the ground, broadening our understanding of food security to include issues like mad cow disease, biodiversity, obesity, and public health. This approach is pushing for a fundamental re-examination of the way we talk about our food and who is included in that conversation. It is based on the notion that people who eat, and who are therefore affected by our food systems, should have a mechanism to participate in shaping the policies that define them.

Public participation in food policy requires a bit of background. The paper begins with a brief introduction to the basics of public participation, the rationale for it, and the different methods used to carry it out. It then examines the scope of participation in policy processes before more specifically looking at the issue of food. Following a brief description on food security and the roots of food policy – or the lack thereof - the paper finally examines the need for public participation in food policy and provides two illustrations from the Canadian experience. What emerges is the realization that the energy to engage citizens in discussions around our food system is not coming primarily from policy makers, but rather from citizens themselves who have organized and initiated processes to influence policy from the ground up.

Figure 3: Food Security, Food Policy and Public Participation Paper Written by Kenton Lobe.

4.0 Outcomes

The findings from the Food Security, Food Policy and Public Participation paper showed that citizens are taking the lead in discussions and influencing policy from the ground up by initiating processes rather than policymakers (Lobe, 2005). The paper reveals lessons that emerge from linking participation to the food system and highlights various key points (Lobe, 2005). Some points highlighted the importance of meaningful public participation and its possibility to empower citizens to shape policy decisions (Lobe, 2005). Traditionally, definitions of participation are government-driven, which requires a shift towards inclusive approaches (Lobe, 2005). The benefit of participation is related to both the outcomes and process because communities bring a wealth of knowledge and perspectives to the policy table (Lobe, 2005). Food crosses numerous policy spheres is interdisciplinary and includes social, economic, health and environmental issues, however, a coherent food policy was still needed (Lobe, 2005. Finally, the remaining challenge for communities to participate in policy is the process of building community capacity for policymakers to recognize the value of community expertise while developing a meaningful and inclusive process (Lobe, 2005).

In February of 2005, the Public Health Agency of Canada released a document titled "Manitoba Food Charter: An Invitation to a Province-Wide Conversation on Food". The document proposed a timeline for the creation of a Manitoba food charter (PHAC, 2005). The proposed timeline outlined several steps: firstly, a meeting with provincial representatives will meet to establish a coordinating committee, agree on a time frame and outline the process to gather input (PHAC, 2005). Then, the committee will gather additional feedback and formulate the first draft by June 1, followed by a province-wide conference video call (PHAC, 2005). Then, in August, a final draft of the charter will be circulated, followed by a face-to-face meeting in Thompson, and lastly, in September, participants will work on garnering support from endorsements from regional bodies, government organizations and institutions (PHAC, 2005). After months of consultation, meetings, engagement, and participation, the Manitoba Food Charter was unveiled in October 2005 (PHAC, 2005).

Food Matters Manitoba (FMM), formerly known as The Manitoba Food Charter, was born out of over 70 community consultations with citizens of Manitoba and their collective visions (FMM, 2009). The vision was to create a sustainable food system (FMM, 2009). Decades of work influenced the emergence of FMM, the organization is committed to educating Manitobans about sustainable food systems and security (FMM, 2009). It also addresses local food issues and conducts workshops and conferences to strengthen relationships and partnerships (FMM, 2009).

5.0 Lessons Learned

City planning can be found at the center of community goals, food systems, socioeconomic dynamics, and environmental sustainability. The lessons learned throughout the process that led to the creation of FMM is that local food systems require meaningful community engagement which emerges as a vital strategy for strengthening societal resilience.

5.1 Ongoing Dialogs and Documentation

One of the lessons learned is that planners can ensure continuity in the decision-making process by documenting ideas and insights as they emerge. Engagement and curiosity are relevant and allow understanding of urban residents' needs. As there is always something going on below the surface that we may not be seeing and would be essential to maintain, engaging in these conversations from a planning perspective is vital. Effective outcomes require ongoing dialogue, documenting, and note-taking as you go to help individuals and organizations remember the conversations.

5.2 Authentic Community Engagement, Inclusivity, and Participation

Lessons emphasize that including diverse perspectives is vital and "must" be embraced (PHAC, 2005). As the food security community is diverse, it requires participation across a broad range of stakeholders, including different levels of government (PHAC, 2005). Due to Northern Manitoba's strong influence on the movement, the document was translated into Cree, which emphasized the importance of inclusivity. Community engagement requires understanding local context and diverse perspectives because communities bring a wealth of knowledge and perspectives to the party table. Participation from the public is about the Democratic debate and citizenship. The emerging concept of food democracy reminds us that active participation in political engagement – broadly defined – is a prerequisite if solutions to the dominant food system's ecological, economic, and social justice consequences are to be achieved. The benefits of participation are seen in both the outcomes and within the process. Therefore, communities must learn and understand the policymaking process in order to participate. This is because public policy affects how society, and governments respond to issues that impact the health and well-being of communities.

"Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."

- World Food Summit

Figure 4: South Osborne Farmers Market is also a CSA pick-up location.

5.3 Community Empowerment and Grassroots Initiatives

FMM today engages Manitobans toward healthy, fair, sustainable food for all. However, it started as a grassroots movement fueled by volunteer energy and community engagement. Volunteer energy and a few organizations started the movement, and at the time, there were few contracts to keep supporting the energy. Through building local institutional capacity, FMM went from a volunteer movement to what it is today. It has a set of bylaws and the Board of Directors. Seeing what FMM into revealed how important it is for local communities to take ownership and get involved in the issues that directly impact their lives, particularly regarding food security and access.

5.4 Sustainability, Vulnerability and Resilience in Food Systems

Local food systems are crucial in increasing ecological resilience, community engagement, and self-sufficiency. As Kenton Lobe mentioned, it was evident during the pandemic that food was not travelling as often, which created extreme vulnerability, shock, and stress to the system. It becomes present that the web needs to be tightened, and an increase in resilience is not just an ecological bonus. That emerges the conversation of how humans and land get together and how agriculture and food play a part. Cities can reduce dependence on long-distance food supply chains by fostering local food, production, and distribution networks. This emphasizes the need for planners to integrate food and security initiatives into broader urban resilience strategies. Community-supported agriculture (CSA), community gardens, and farmers markets provide space for residents to connect with one another, participate in shared activities, and build social networks. Planners can support the development of these initiatives by incorporating provisions for community gardens and urban agriculture zones into zoning regulations, land-use plans, and urban design frameworks. As highlighted by Kenton Lobe the success of the extensive process and collaboration with community groups and residents can be measured by how the farmer's market scene has grown and the increase in CSAs in Manitoba. When the food security conversations began, there were only three or four CSAs in Manitoba, and now there are over 35. Farmers markets have also drastically grown, and the awareness of discourse on local food production and privilege continues to grow.

Looking at what FMM has become today, it is clear that community participation and collaboration between residents and policymakers are the keys to a sustainable and resilient food system, and the conversations must continue.

6.0 Final Thoughts

Extensive work preceding and following the establishment of the food charter was facilitated by the discussion papers and actions for government and community participation in food policy discussions (PHAC, 2005). As with any project, the pathway was not without hurdles or challenges. However, the main takeaway was that the invested time in collective dialogue focusing on shared agreements was highly valuable (PHAC, 2005). Planners and policymakers can build trust and shape the future by cultivating ongoing conversations. The model used in Manitoba can easily be used as a best practice for other municipalities and provinces to use in creating their own food charter.

"One measures the health of society by the quality of functions performed by local citizens"

- Alexis de Tocqueville

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List of Figures