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Statewide Food Policy Councils: Considerations for Minnesota Policymakers

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Summary of Findings

- Statewide food policy councils (Councils) are cross-sector bodies that help states comprehensively address food system objectives related to agriculture, health, economic development, and the environment.
- Councils have engaged in several activities relevant to Minnesota such as developing food charters, spearheading policies that support farm-to-school efforts, and supporting local and regional councils.
- Challenges for Councils include working with diverse stakeholders, reliance on a voluntary workforce, and lack of financial or political support.
- Councils overcome challenges with the support of inclusive leadership, members who can establish common ground, and resources like legislative buy-in and funding.

The Role of Statewide Food Policy Councils

Although state governments have considerable authority to implement their own food-related policies and programs, they do not have Departments of Food. Rather, food policy issues often span the work of several state agencies such as Agriculture, Public Health, Economic Development, and Natural Resources. Statewide food policy councils (Councils) have been formed in at least 30 states to influence the food policy environment through education, awareness building, research, and advocacy. Councils may work directly with government in an advisory capacity or rally public support through events, advocacy campaigns, consumer education, and activation of key stakeholders. In Minnesota, legislation has been proposed to form a Council that would bring together representatives from across the state's food system to advise policymakers. In this brief, we examine the experience of Councils in other states and provide recommendations relevant to Minnesota.

Activities and Outcomes Relevant to Minnesota

Existing Councils have several common activities and outcomes relevant to Minnesota:

1) Councils can assist in the development and implementation of a food charter, a document based on public input that outlines strategic recommendations and measures of success for food systems change in the state. The Michigan Food Policy Council, for example, provided direction to the *Michigan Good Food Charter* and continues to make policy recommendations to incrementally fulfill the six goals outlined in the charter. The Minnesota Food Charter is launching in October 2014 and will include recommendations based on public input that could provide strategic direction to Minnesota's food system.

2) Several Councils have championed policy changes that have institutionalized the procurement of local food by school districts, a practice commonly referred to as "farm to school." For example, the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council compiled relevant information for the public, stakeholders, and lawmakers and was a leading force in the *New Mexico Grown Fresh Fruit and Vegetables for School Meals* legislation that appropriated \$240,000 in recurring funds toward the procurement of New Mexico grown produce for school lunches. Farm to school programs offer a number of documented benefits, including increased fruit and vegetable consumption in children, and greater diversification of farm income for agricultural producers. The Minnesota Department of Health and Minnesota Department of Agriculture both support farm to school initiatives, but lack a state policy that provides schools with a financial incentive to purchase food from Minnesota producers.

3) Some Councils coordinate grassroots activities at the state level independent from government, often serving as networking and support organizations for local and regional councils. In some states, two complementary Councils operate in tandem at the state level. For example, the Alaska Food Policy Council is a grassroots Council that led to the creation of the Alaska Food Resource Working Group through executive order, but continues to operate as an independent Council. There are approximately 20 local and regional councils currently active in Minnesota; nearly all have explicitly expressed interest in being involved with a statewide Council.

Challenges and Factors for Success

Councils face a variety of challenges:

- **Varying Viewpoints.** Collaboration between diverse stakeholders within the food system is essential to create comprehensive food policy, but the process can be contentious. The food system appears to many to be polarized with agricultural commodity groups and food processors on one side and organic and sustainable food advocates on the other. In reality, significant common ground can be found between these varying perspectives.
- **Volunteer Workforce.** Councils frequently rely on voluntary members and voluntary staff, making sustained momentum and engagement of nontraditional members difficult.
- **Lack of Support.** Some Councils lack support from public officials, or have faced opposition from industry and corporate groups. As a result, six of the 15 Councils created by executive order or state legislation have undergone transitions in which the work of the Council has taken on a new form, such as a period of stagnation followed by re-emergence or decentralization into local and regional Councils. For all these reasons, Councils may need years to solidify trust between members, establish credibility, and reformulate, if needed.

Key factors that can enable Councils to overcome these challenges include:

- **Strong Leadership.** Leaders are effective when they are inclusive and open-minded, exhibit a long-term vision, and facilitate a process that emphasizes shared values and mutual learning rather than individual or group agendas.
- **Common Ground among Collaborative Members.** Councils can overcome polarization by taking time to establish common ground for agreement. The Illinois Food Farm and Jobs Council, for example, hosted a forum that enabled diverse representatives from the state's divided food system to establish the shared goal of improving the local food marketplace. Council members should be selected on the basis of their collaboration skills and willingness to see value in perspectives that differ from their own. All interests in the state's food system should be equally represented.
- **Legislative Support and Involvement.** Councils have found that direct involvement from the state legislature can enhance political influence and long-term sustainability. Funding can be used to recruit diverse members, provide staffing, and cover startup costs.

Moving Forward in Minnesota

Experiences of Councils in other states demonstrate how Minnesota could also benefit from a Council. A Council in Minnesota could provide policymakers with a mechanism to respond to the food access needs and recommendations presented in the Minnesota Food Charter. There are many resources available to help a Council navigate Minnesota's food policy environment, including: national toolkits, established leaders of existing local and regional councils within Minnesota, and state institutions like public health and extension who partner with existing councils in Minnesota and in other states. These assets can help a Council negotiate challenges and learn from successes of others. By channeling the current momentum and utilizing existing infrastructure within the state, a Council could positively impact the health, environment, and economic vibrancy of Minnesota into the future.