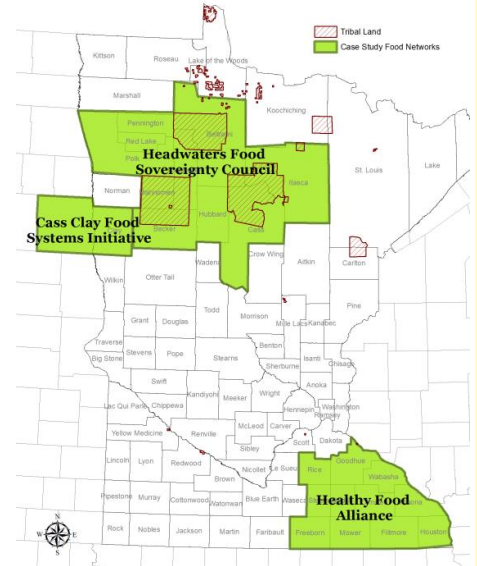


Making Soup: 8 Ingredients for Successful Food Network Collaboration

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RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Food networks, also known as food policy councils, are diverse groups of food advocates who gather to learn from each other, build relationships, and generate collective action around food systems programs and policies. In September 2013, two Extension Educators interviewed core five members of three food networks in Minnesota (fifteen interviews total) in order to better understand their successes and challenges. These networks include the Headwaters Food Sovereignty Council, the Cass Clay Food Systems Initiative, and the Healthy Food Alliance (see map).



EIGHT INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS

The interviews with food network leaders revealed that collaborating to build a successful food network is akin to making a soup from scratch. This metaphor was inspired by one of the leaders of the Headwaters Food Sovereignty Council as she described the deliberate process that was necessary to build the network:

Going back to that whole building of the coalition...I think it needed to happen at the rate that it happened. I think it needed to be a slow boil, until everything got cooked really well together, and the flavors have been developed. Because then it's a really rich soup.... Having been part of coalitions where people get impatient and just want to do stuff, and watch it fall apart because people don't trust each other, or they get mad at each other.... How do you weigh that? Do you hurry up? Or do you let your soup cook?

Drawing on this apt metaphor, the research findings are presented as eight ingredients for success that can guide the work of emerging and existing food networks.

First Ingredient: Create Stock from Relationships

Solid relationships are the foundation of the food network, or the stock of the soup. Across the three food networks, core members commonly used words like “connections” and “relationships” to describe how the networks had been successful. Core members from all three networks also indicated that networks need time to build relationships during the formative stage, because these relationships become the foundation of cooperation, trust, and reciprocity that helps networks accomplish their mission and grow as an organization. Time and process are two tools that can help food network leaders cultivate trust.

Second Ingredient: Choose Complementary Flavors

Building connections is contingent upon finding a variety of quality ingredients for your soup, with flavors that complement and are not too overpowering. Food networks need diverse membership so they can address food systems comprehensively without becoming too focused on one issue or campaign. They also need to be able to sustain diverse membership over time by minimizing membership turnover and conflict. We found that if food networks are able to choose complementary flavors, they are well positioned to bring together food system activists and practitioners to form mutually beneficial partnerships. A leader from the Healthy Food Alliance, for example, described how the network was envisioned as a “way to engage new partners, even partners we weren’t doing specific projects with. Maybe this could spur a different collaboration towards a healthier food system.”



Third Ingredient: Simmer with Patience

A good soup stock needs time to simmer so the flavors can coalesce. Time is such a critical part of the group dynamic that it almost cannot be overestimated. Core members of the Healthy Food Alliance spent approximately one year in the network development phase, strengthening existing relationships and creating new ones across an eleven county region. One member of the group described how it had taken approximately six to nine months to settle on the name Healthy Food Alliance, but that “even though it took a while, it was really important.” In literature about food networks, it is common for the development phase of behind the scenes planning to take as long as a year.

Fourth Ingredient: Cater to the Audience

Good soup comes in an endless array of flavors, but no single recipe is going to please every crowd. For example, the best beef and barley recipe in the world will never satisfy a roomful of vegetarians. In order to make the perfect soup, you must be familiar on some level with the palate of your audience. Food networks also should be aware of and responsive to the intentions and tensions within the community. Many food networks have used community food assessments or other engaged public input processes to understand the motives, assets, and needs of their community. The Cass Clay Food Systems Initiative worked with a metropolitan planning entity (known as MetroCOG) to develop a Metropolitan Food Systems Plan using a combination of research and community input. The plan is currently being used to demonstrate to local decision makers that there is public support for the integration of food access and local food issues into local and county policy development, specifically through the formation of a Cass Clay Food Systems Advisory Commission.

For more information or a copy of the full report, contact Noelle Harden, harde073@umn.edu

Fifth Ingredient: Obtain Proper Equipment

On the most practical level, it is very difficult if not impossible to prepare and cook soup without basic equipment such as a pot, spoon, cutting board, and knife. For food networks, funding and dedicated staff time are two pieces of equipment that enable networks to manage the coordination and labor needed to make progress. Strong financial and social assets (i.e. money and people) can help networks avoid what members of the Headwaters Food Sovereignty Council described as “waxing and waning” in both activities and membership. All three of the networks in our study have utilized funding from the Statewide Health Improvement Program in Minnesota, but to greatly varying degrees. A member of the Headwaters Food Sovereignty Council explained that partnering with funders from the program presented some challenges for the group because “there were just a few people who were savvy to the language of SHIP, and understood the acronyms and references that SHIP brought in.... And not just the acronyms, but what are the implications of dealing with this huge entity?” While funding and dedicated staff are vital tools for many food networks, taking the time to choose tools that are appropriate for the dynamic of the group members and broader community is essential to the long-term sustainability.



Sixth Ingredient: Embrace the Mess

As core members of our three case study networks became familiar with the needs of their audiences, they had to make adjustments in their approach to the food network. Making soup is always messy, and so is collaboration. Our networks share several challenges related to negotiating the complexity of diverse membership and food systems as a “wicked” problem, such as: members have different goals that do not always align, the food policy environment is complicated and dynamic, and impact is difficult to measure. A member from the Headwaters Food Sovereignty Council explained how she had embraced the challenge of measuring success:

It's measurable in a really different way. But anyone who lives in the community can tell. Especially those who kind of have their ear to the ground already. But, you know, things like food sovereignty, or food justice, or access, those are terms that are now being thrown around a lot more than before. And so, how do you measure that? I don't know. My community feels better? More people are talking about, you know, down with Monsanto? I don't know. So I just measure it by relationships - the more people that are together and know each other.

Seventh Ingredient: Adapt the Structure

Making soup might be messy, but there is always some structure underlying the process. Sometimes the process is very clear, like following a recipe. Other times, there is organization but with a lot of flexibility, taste testing, and adjusting embedded into the process. Each of the three networks in our study found ways to negotiate an appropriate structure that fit the needs and styles of different members and communities. The Cass Clay Food Systems Initiative is organized with an overarching steering committee and three task forces, while the Headwaters Food Sovereignty Council has a more casual structure.

Eighth Ingredient: Serve the Soup!

One interviewee ended her interview with a call to “Serve some people the soup! Get out the bowls and cups...to go ahead and be bold, and let our voices be heard!” Serving the soup means that the network needs to step beyond the initial successes of bringing people together, engaging in a dialogue, initiating and supporting projects, in order to bring about changes that have a broader impact. Members of Headwaters Food Sovereignty Council suggested that it was time for the network to “take on policy work more” and even “throw away some of that Minnesota Nice.” Serving the soup also means taking the time to celebrate and reflect on the successes of the network, even if they seem small.

This report is a product of the research of Noelle Harden and Sheila Onzere based on interviews conducted in September 2013. This research was supported by North Country Community Transformation Grant and the Regional Sustainable Development Partnership.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ABOUT FOOD NETWORKS

- [Doing Food Policy Councils Right: A Guide to Development and Action](#). A 2012 guide developed by Mark Winne Associates.
- [Food Policy Councils: Lessons Learned](#). A 2009 report by Food First and Community Food Security Coalition.
- [Good Laws, Good Food: Putting Local Food Policies to Work for Our Communities](#). A 2012 toolkit by the Harvard Law School Food Law and Policy Clinic.
- [Let's Eat Local!](#) A website hosting information about the Cass Clay Food Systems Initiative.
- [Headwaters Food Sovereignty Council](#). A website hosting information from the formation period of the Headwaters Food Sovereignty Council.
- [Healthy Food Alliance](#). A Facebook website hosting information for the Healthy Food Alliance.

