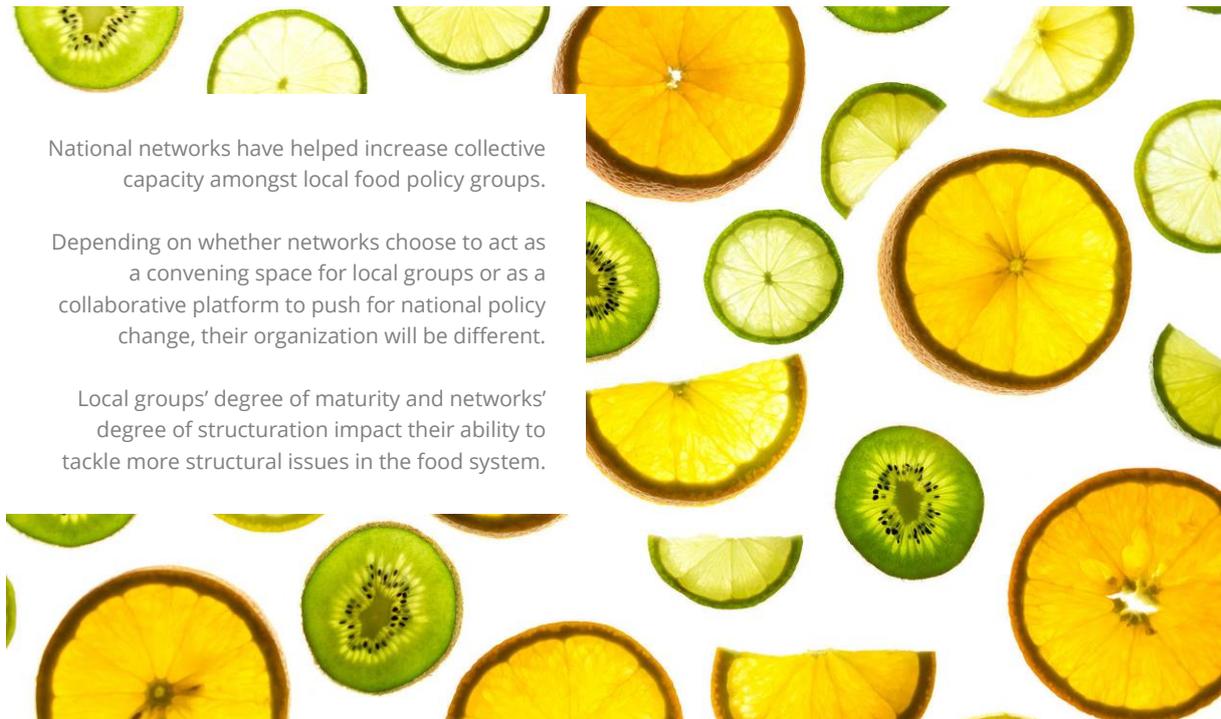


# Do national food policy networks make a difference?



National networks have helped increase collective capacity amongst local food policy groups.

Depending on whether networks choose to act as a convening space for local groups or as a collaborative platform to push for national policy change, their organization will be different.

Local groups' degree of maturity and networks' degree of structuration impact their ability to tackle more structural issues in the food system.

As local food policy groups (also known as food policy councils, food councils, and food partnerships) have developed, so have national, regional, and international networks that connect them. Such networks are emerging nationally (e.g., in Germany, Spain, Canada, and the Netherlands), regionally (e.g., EAT Nordic Cities Initiative, African Food Security Urban Network) and globally (e.g., the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, ICLEI-RUAF CITYFOOD network).

**What can we expect from such networks?** A recent article analyses two well-established national food policy networks in the United States and the United Kingdom. Its conclusions will help any network to evaluate its role in advancing food systems change.

## Increasing collective capacity

The researchers studied two networks that operate at the national level in two different countries: the [Food Policy Networks project](#) in the US and the [Sustainable Food Cities network](#) in the UK. Although these two countries are very different (for example regarding the level of autonomy given to local authorities or the funding landscape), the comparison helps improve understanding about what the networks (can) do to support local food policy groups.

What have these national networks achieved so far? The researchers point to a number of immaterial yet crucial achievements, among which:

- **Increasing collaboration between local food policy groups.** For example, networks help local groups identify their peers facing similar issues and organise into working groups. Second, they have facilitated connections with other networks on specific topics. For

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example, in the UK, the Sustainable Food Cities Network initiated a collaboration with organisations working on food poverty, which led to the creation of the [UK Food Poverty Alliance](#). This bridged the gap between food and broader social campaigns around living wages and equity.

- **Legitimizing local food policy groups and their actions.** Belonging to a network is a way for local food policy groups to contextualise their work and reduce isolation. In the US, the [Food Policy Networks' census](#) allows them to show that they relate to a wider social movement. In the UK, the [Sustainable Food Cities Network awards](#) give them visibility at the national level.
- **Building capacity of local food policy groups.** The networks provide resources, training, and technical assistance for local food policy groups to improve their capacity to work on local food systems issues.

Last but not least, another key achievement of the networks is their contribution to **shifting food systems narratives**, i.e. policy makers' and funders' ways of apprehending food systems issues. Networks have made systems approaches and cross-sectoral partnerships seen as a relevant way to deal with food systems issues.

### Shying away from structural issues?

There are, however, questions that still need answering regarding the networks' contribution to transformative food systems change. One of them relates to how networks should go about change. **Should they tackle structural issues, such as land ownership, racial equity, labour rights, and, more generally, power relations, that are at the core of current, unsustainable and inequitable food systems?** Or should they focus on quick wins?

This question has no single answer, as not all local groups may agree upon how to address more contentious food systems issues, individually or collectively. **Local food policy groups - themselves networks representing a diversity of local stakeholders - often struggle to agree upon shared messages within their groups.** For example, issues such as minimum wage increases may be difficult to discuss in groups in which food business members oppose such policies.

**Vast geographical divisions within both countries also underlie significant cultural, political, and economic differences in local food systems issues and the local food policy groups addressing them.** For instance, the composition and goals of councils in wealthier, politically progressive cities may look quite different than those in politically conservative rural areas or economically distressed cities. This makes the task of finding shared messages and advocacy platforms across local groups even more challenging.

### A network: what for, after all?

At first glance, the US and the UK networks have similar objectives, namely: **facilitating peer-to-peer exchanges and learning, building the capacity of local food policy groups, and supporting research and evaluation of action.**

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However, defining a national network's objectives is not as easy as it sounds. Indeed, according to Raychel Santo, who co-authored the article, networks face an interesting dilemma: **should they act as a convening and training space for local groups or as a collaborative platform to push for national policy change? Or both?**

These two objectives point to different ways to organise the network as they impact:

- **Membership and decision-making processes.** For example, one can assume that the UK network's ability to launch collective campaigns is made possible by its more structured nature which includes a formal membership process.
- **The way they allocate their resources.** Depending on their objective, networks may allocate time and resources to influence the national policy process or to provide technical assistance to their members. Which local groups they highlight and materially support also plays a role in their impact.

### Be prepared for change

If the first question a network should be asking itself and its members is "what is our purpose?", Raychel Santo insists that it should ask the question on a regular basis. Indeed, **local food policy groups are constantly changing, and so are their needs.**

For instance, volunteers and funding come and go. Consequently, local groups' priorities and resources change. It is likely that what they expect from a network will also evolve over time.

Furthermore, as local actors get to know each other better, they may find ways to discuss more contentious issues, therefore enabling the networks that represent them to expand the scope of issues they address too. **The maturation of local groups may also open up more opportunities to develop a common platform for action at a higher level.**

As a consequence, networks should be ready to adapt to cater for their members' evolving needs.

