

Participatory Food Systems Governance

An Introduction to: Advancing Food Systems Governance: Perspectives of Canadian Civil Society Organizations

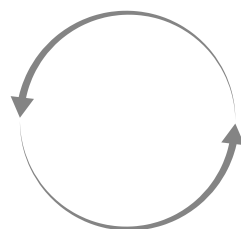
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What is this research about and why is it important?

This research paper focuses on the theory and practice of food systems governance. It discusses what this concept means for Canadian civil society organization (CSO) leaders. This topic matters because most food systems still tend to be governed in top-down, siloed ways. Such governance contributes to unsustainable and inequitable outcomes. CSOs are working to transform these systems by challenging the underlying power dynamics, and by “advancing” new approaches and governance models to augment or replace what we have now.

Key Findings: Three key themes emerged from the research on the meanings of food systems governance from the standpoint of CSOs.



1 Food Systems Governance as Confronting Power Relations

CSOs advocate for more participatory, inclusive and democratic governance approaches.

Along with the imbalance of power within governance, **high levels of corporate concentration** in food systems affect food systems governance.

Food systems governance “**is all about power dynamics**”, and how “local government has a lot of responsibility, but not authority or resources.” – Barbara Emanuel, retired manager of the Toronto Food Strategy

“Increasingly, we see the concentration of power in the hands of a number of global corporations, these are working in global trade, these are companies controlling the seed industry, these are companies controlling the food agency.” – Mustafa Koç, sociology professor at the Toronto Metropolitan University

Agency involves a reclaiming of authority by putting the needs of food systems and the needs of people as priority.

Active resistance involves building alternative structures by challenging the formal governance structures.

Governance is about “who’s participating, who’s making decisions, whose voices are being heard, who has power and who doesn’t, whose ideas are being represented in the way we build our food systems?” – Ali English, director of the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario

2 Food Systems Governance as Integrative, Cross-Scaler, Collaborative and Context-Specific

The second theme flows from the first theme and addresses the existence of **multiple meanings of food systems governance** as integrative, cross-scaler, collaborative, and context-specific.

Governance “is how we work well together so that everyone has access to healthy, quality food... when it comes to the governance of food systems, we need to be putting many different heads together to be able to work on these issues and the involvement of people who are most affected by those kinds of decisions absolutely need to be at the table.” –Audrey Demars-Vandenberghe, director of R seau Agriconseils Outaouais

Cross-scaler: Food systems governance needs to work in collaboration across national, international and local sectors, and across industries, with Indigenous peoples, and across multiple governance systems, to make for stronger food systems.

Context-specific: Food systems are different across different locations, as there are unique sets of actors and contexts in each place/situation.

3 Food Systems Governance as Modeling Participatory Decision-Making Processes

The third theme accentuates the importance of a **place-based and context-specific approach to governance**, and thus the requirement of a participatory decision-making process within food governance.

Food systems governance is like a “pot of soup in which ingredients are to be added. Water is necessary to make it cook. . . But the ingredients are different, and the ingredients matter most.”– Faris Ahmed, food systems consultant



What is a main takeaway and goal for the research presented in this paper?

To advance alternative governance systems, CSO leaders use their own forms of governance as a tool to transform the top-down and siloed governance models. CSOs can therefore act both in resistance to government and in concert with it to advance these different systems. Governance involves practice and theory together: this research acts as a bridge between understandings of governance from those who have experienced it and its discussion in the literature. Instead of current top-down and siloed models, food systems governance should be integrative, cross-scaler, collaborative, context-specific, inclusive of diverse voices and perspectives, and address food systems in more holistic ways. The research in this paper intends to amplify this vision from CSO leaders.



Food Systems Governance:

Food systems: understanding food as part of complex systems; holistic; place-based; involves processes and relationships in many different systems

Governance: establishing rules, norms, and policies; managing decision-making processes among diverse actors; the workings and relations of government; the relationships, processes, and structures through which power and control are exercised and decisions are made

Food systems governance: By being more inclusive, participatory, and integrative across actors, sectors and scales, food systems governance shows ways of governing food systems to result in more equitable and sustainable outcomes.



The full research paper will be published soon, stay tuned for this important research on CSO perspectives on food systems governance, and transforming food systems into more equitable models!

