

# Civil Society Engagement in Food Systems Governance in Canada: Experiences, Gaps and Possibilities

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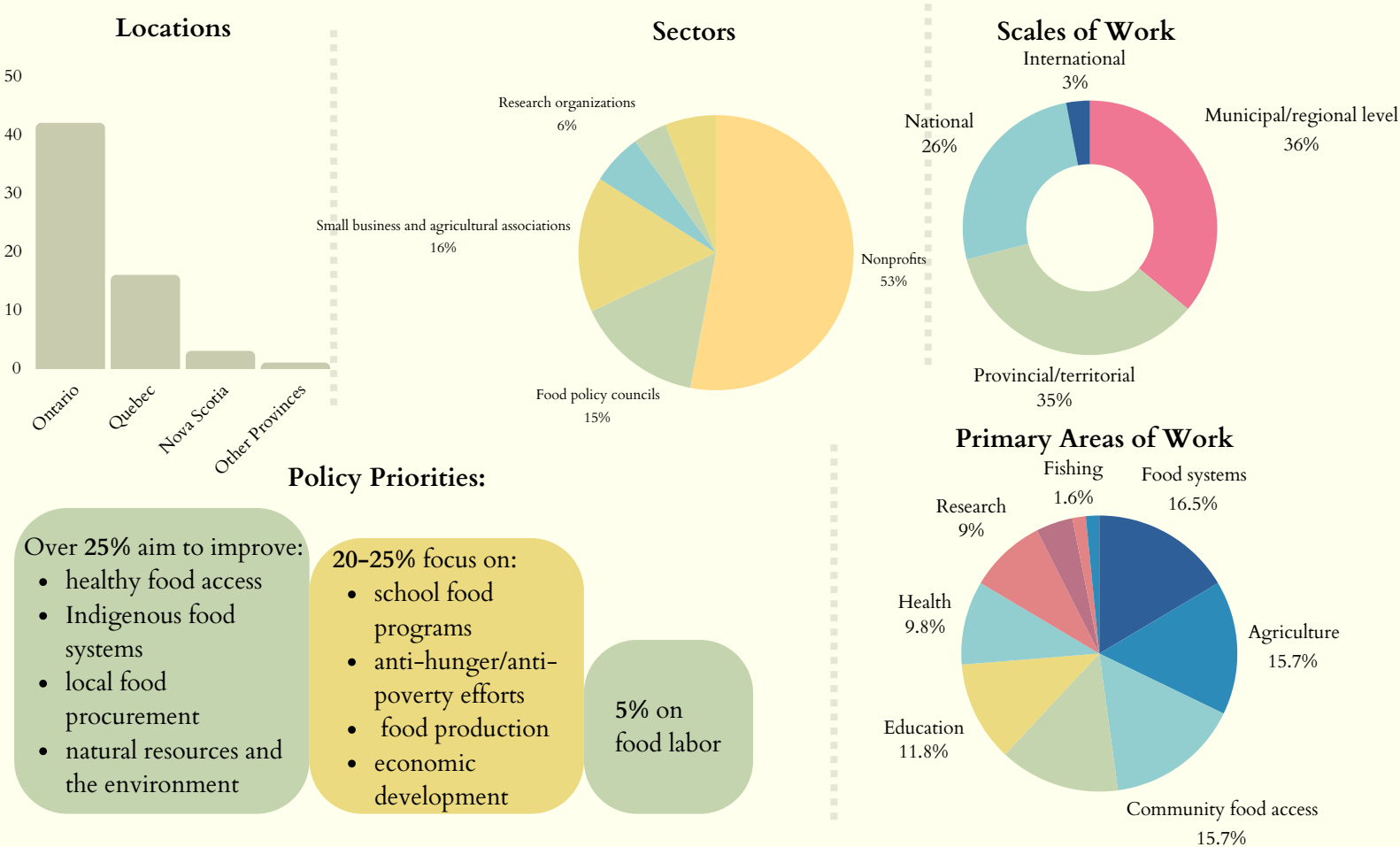
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## Summary

Food system governance is dominated by a small number of companies and government officials, often resulting in decisions oriented towards profit rather than health, equity, and sustainability. In Canada, many civil society organizations (CSOs) are working to establish governance structures that are more collaborative, democratic, and rooted in social and environmental justice. CSOs advance these alternative forms of governance by prioritizing the needs of small-scale producers and harvesters, workers across the food chain, and others most impacted by the dominant food system. This research used a cross-Canada survey and interviews to document the experiences of CSOs engaged in governance. It also identified gaps requiring further study if the vision of more participatory governance structures is to be realized.

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

## The Participatory Food Systems Governance Survey: Responses from 69 CSOs from across Canada and Indigenous Territories



## 5 Key Gaps

### Describing the Meaning of Participatory Food Systems Governance

**Collaborative governance is a goal, yet most respondents are involved primarily in consultations rather than decision making. Addressing the gaps in skills, resources and capacity is essential to provide opportunities for the creation of participatory food systems governance.**

### Learning from Food Movement Histories

There are key moments when civil society actors have come together to address policy and governance across sectors. **Learning from food movement histories offers valuable historical insights. Documenting the history and achievements of CSOs active in food systems work shares the successes and challenges that contributed to this moment.**

### Deepening Meaningful Indigenous-Settler Relationships

Greater emphasis should be placed on **meaningful Indigenous-settler relationships** as an important part of collaborative food systems governance that speaks to the treaty context and ongoing reality of settler colonialism in Canada. There is **more learning needed about Indigenous food sovereignty and Indigenous governance, perspective and approaches** that could be shared and supported.

### Addressing Food Systems Labor Issues

**Labor concerns are central to food systems, yet are relatively absent in food systems governance spaces and the work of food systems CSOs in general.**

### Considering Participatory Food Systems Governance in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

**The onset of the pandemic in early 2020 highlighted vulnerabilization** (people/communities are not inherently vulnerable, but are made vulnerable by dominant social structures) of essential workers at multiple points across the food chain (e.g. farm and retail work). This brought to the fore **the need for greater attention to issues of equity in food systems governance work.**

## Limitations & Benefits of CSO Engagement in Food Systems Governance

### Limitations:

CSOs could be more engaged in **national-level food systems governance**, however there are challenges that limit this engagement: **Lack of meaningful opportunities; time-consuming and resource-intensive; lack of funding for this work.**

- Food governance requires an understanding of the connections and relationships between actors, as opposed to focusing on a single issue.
- There is limited coordination among organizations active on food issues.

### Benefits:

CSOs are rooted in place and in relationships with individuals and communities and are uniquely positioned to bring the concerns from people most affected by the issues into decision-making.

**Food systems governance must go beyond singular issues to engage with food not only in the material sense, but as an essential element of all life that connects individuals, communities and cultures.**