

Moving Beyond Awareness to Action and Food System Transformation: Prioritizing Labor in Food Systems Governance Work

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There exists a lack of recognition of labor issues within food systems work, especially within food systems governance work. Labor in the food industry includes: the working conditions and circumstances through which food is grown, harvested, processed, packaged, transported, marketed and disposed of. Food system governance work involves the policies, laws, and regulations that shape the food systems and therefore the way food labor is managed and organized. Governance involves a dynamic process of negotiation, tension and collaboration, and questions of power within governance affects decision-making, which in-turn cultivates or inhibits particular activities. A focus on governance shifts our attention to broader systems change and transformation of our food systems as a whole instead of focusing on particular organizations. For example, migrant workers, farm workers, and allies are looking for systemic change to immigration policies and permanent status, shifting the conversation away from individual farmers. The goal of the paper is to identify the barriers to more meaningful engagement with labor issues in food work. The research found that many food-related civil society organizations (CSOs) are willing and ready to collaborate to engage in labor issues, but many do not move beyond awareness-raising of these issues. Though not every organization needs to address every food-related theme, food labor is one theme that all food organizations should engage with, as food labor is inextricably linked to all food issues (it is not an issue in and of itself). The shared struggles between workers and farmers might offer ways for food systems CSOs to work alongside food and farm workers to challenge and transform the food system together.

Moving beyond awareness raising

A fundamental transformation is required in how CSOs view food systems & build meaningful relationships with food and farm workers.

Action-oriented work involves:

- **Literacy** on how **oppression shapes food systems** & on **building collective organizing** capacity of CSOs
- **Advocacy** and **policy-building**
- **Including** farmworkers in CSO organizations and governance structures
- Working to help **grant full immigration status, or permanent status, to migrant workers**

Current Situation for food system CSOs & Labor issues:

CSOs demonstrate concern, but lack action

What we heard from CSOs:

“It’s something that we care about, but it’s not a central focus of our work.”

“No... We cannot do everything- you have to pick stuff, right?”

“We’re very aware of that... but we do not spend a lot of time on it.”

“We know that there are labor problems, but we are not really associated with this, other than sharing opportunities.”

“there’s definitely an awareness, but not great action.”

Findings in this research are framed by a settler-dominated food systems lens. Different understandings of labor issues exists in Northern and Indigenous food systems, requiring **settler-Indigenous relations to be addressed within food systems governance spaces.**

Food labor is an essential component of food systems: Shifting the conversation for collaborative action involves:

- Shifting the conversation to a **structural level**
- **Systemic change** to **immigration policy** to shift the conversation away from individual farmers
- Going further to name and acknowledge the **structural tensions in the food systems** as operating in **capitalist production**

Shared struggle: Many farmers are hurt by the same structures that harm food and farm workers.

“it’s all tied to the interests of growers. **It’s all about the produce being more important than the people** behind it- than the workers behind it.”

A holistic understanding is needed to make **visible** the full scope of labor within food systems & structures that shape the conditions of the work.

“...thinking about food system organizing... **as groups of workers supporting other workers...**”

To build food and farm worker solidarity:

*A key strategy moving forward is **building solidarity** amongst food and farm workers, including workers at food systems CSOs.*

Food labor struggles are everyone’s struggles

