

Food systems planning experts say it's time to reflect on local governments' efforts

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Samina Raja, Ph.D., professor of urban and regional planning, University at Buffalo. Credit: University at Buffalo

Governments across the U.S. and Canada have made strides in their food systems planning efforts, with many recognizing within the past decade

that the issue of food insecurity is just as important as maintaining other public infrastructure like roads and water systems.

Still, questions remain: How are [local governments](#) engaging in the food system? Who are they engaging with, and who are they leaving out? How is government involvement advancing or impeding the creation of equitable and just [food systems](#)? How are their efforts being measured, and how should they change what they're doing?

These are among the key questions addressed in a special issue of the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, published Wednesday. It is the world's only peer-reviewed journal focused specifically on food and farming-related community development.

The special issue was co-edited by Samina Raja, professor of urban and regional planning in the University at Buffalo's School of Architecture and Planning, along with Jill Clark, associate professor in The Ohio State University John Glenn College of Public Affairs; Kimberly Hodgson, founder and principal consultant of Cultivating Healthy Places; and Julia Freedgood, assistant vice president of programs for the American Farmland Trust.

Food systems are the soil-to-soil systems that enable food to travel from farm to plate, explains Raja, who is also principal investigator of the Food Systems Planning and Healthy Communities Lab housed within UB's School of Architecture and Planning.

"Engagement in food systems planning is no longer a new concern for local governments," the co-editors write in their accompanying editorial in the special issue. "Local governments across North America have developed, enacted and, indeed, implemented policies that are ostensibly designed to strengthen food systems."

This has all taken place largely over the past 10 years. The key, they add, for the next decade, will be for governments to measure their progress or failure, identify successes and jettison failed policies.

While there have been some successes, Raja and her co-editors also note that local government engagement in food systems planning still varies widely: some are convening conversations, while others are passing laws and ordinances. And some have decided not to act, which, the co-editors argue, is a policy decision.

"It is important that local governments exercise reflection about how policy and planning processes amplify, or dampen, marginalized voices in planning for community food systems," says Raja. "In planning for good food systems, the conversation should not only be about the equitable and inclusive plans, but about the equitable and inclusive planning processes."

The special issue was sponsored by Growing Food Connections, a national initiative aimed at enhancing community food security while ensuring sustainable and economically viable agriculture and food production. The 11 manuscripts in the issue were selected for publication following an open call for submissions developed by the guest editors, in partnership with the journal.

Collectively, the articles in this special issue illustrate new frontiers in, and challenges to, the governance of food systems by:

- analyzing how local government policies and plans are being developed to strengthen food systems;
- probing the progress and obstacles in implementing policies;
- analyzing how local governments are monitoring and evaluating their policies.

The experiences of several local governments are represented, including those from multiple communities in California; Buffalo and New York City, New York; Cass County, North Dakota; Clay County and Minneapolis, Minnesota; Baltimore, Maryland; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Seattle, Washington. Also included are multiple municipalities in British Columbia, as well as Toronto, Ontario.

The journal is open access, which will allow governments and policymakers from around the world to learn from other communities' successes and failures. That's key, says Ohio State's Clark.

"We are excited to work with JAFSCD on this special issue. Many of our authors, and all of the editors, are community-based researchers. Therefore, it is critical that the local governments and partners presented here, in addition to communities across the globe, have free access to these research articles," she said.

One article details the collaboration among governments, food systems professionals and community members in neighboring Cass County, North Dakota, and Clay County, Minnesota. The article's authors note some successes, but also caution that the formal institutionalization of collaborative arrangements within local government can stymie the productive capacity of non-governmental partners and slow or shut down policy advancements.

In addition, case studies from a number of American states, plus Ontario in Canada, offer both inspiration and caution about municipalities' involvement in food systems. Another article uses Baltimore as an example of how other local governments can plan for better [food](#) system resiliency before, during and after a disaster.

More information: *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* (2018). [DOI: 10.5304/jafscd.2018.08B.014](https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2018.08B.014)

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