

Attempts to organize the Flint Food System

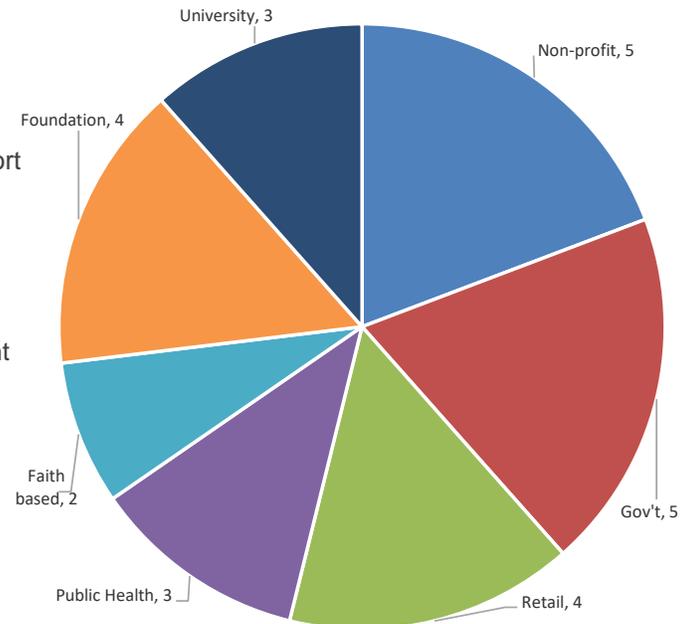
SUMMARY

In order to identify ways to improve Flint’s food system in the future, we must understand past attempts to organize the food system. We wanted to learn which stakeholders have tried to organize the food system over the last decade (2009-2019) and how they tried to do it. What worked well and what didn’t? Why did some things work and other things not work as well? We interviewed 26 people from non-profit organizations, government, religious organizations, and other groups to understand this. We found that between 2009 and the Flint Water Crisis, different stakeholder groups tried to organize the system to improve food access, in part through food policy initiatives. They were met with challenges due to distrust, conflict between organizations, and limited organizational capacity. In response to the disastrous Flint Water Crisis, many stakeholders began working collaboratively to access newly available resources and bring more healthy food into Flint. However, these efforts were less systematic in scope than earlier actions. Going forward, a greater emphasis is needed on building food system-wide strategies.

MAJOR FINDINGS

- Actions to organize the food system can be broken into those that took place before the Flint Water Crisis and those that occurred afterwards, with some continuing throughout.
- Starting in 2009, attempts to organize the Flint food system were motivated by the lack of grocery stores; difficulties in finding transport to grocery stores; high priced and low-quality food; health problems within the community; low incomes; vacant land available for gardening; and a belief that urban gardening can build community and improve health.
- Prior to the Water Crisis, important efforts focused on (1) forming a Food Policy Council, (2) inclusion of language about food in the Flint Master Plan, and (3) raising money for gardening and food access initiatives.
- Starting before the Water Crisis and continuing throughout was the role of the Community Foundation of Greater Flint “Food System Navigator” in trying to build trust between food-related groups and forge a food strategy.
- Following the Water Crisis, activities taken by food-related groups focused on bringing in newly available funding to support increased access to healthy food, food distribution, and local food consolidation
- Challenges in organizing the system before the Water Crisis included weak collaboration and distrust between food-related organizations; limited engagement with community members; limited staff capacity; and limited government action on food.
- However, after the Water Crisis, collaborating organizations leveraged these early efforts toward building trust and bringing in new resources. Many interviewees believe post-Water Crisis collaboration is better, see important new resources in food system, and believe there is greater consciousness of the importance of healthy food.
- **Current opportunity:** Substantial funding has come into the Flint food system, but there is little in the way of coordinated planning for the future. This was a goal of forming a Food Policy Council and early work by the Food System Navigator but was largely put aside when the Flint Water Crisis struck. Actors in the system have successfully collaborated on implementing food-related programs; now they can collaborate to plan the future of the food system.

Interviewees by category



Authors: Andrew Gerard and Maria Claudia Lopez, Michigan State University. Contact: mlopez@msu.edu.

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APPROACH

- We conducted interviews with 26 individuals from 18 organizations. We identified these interviewees by starting with individuals who had been involved in attempts to organize the Flint food system for at least a decade. We interviewed these initial people, and then asked them to suggest others that we should interview.
- We asked interviewees about challenges motivating action in 2009, how things had changed in the past ten years, and what they had observed in terms of the success or challenges in efforts, among other questions. Most interviews took about one hour. We recorded interviews, transcribed the interviews from recordings, and then analyzed the interviews. We promised to provide interviewees confidentiality; that is, we would not use their names or connect their statements to their organizations.

OPPORTUNITIES

The combination of the great need created by the Flint Water Crisis, improved collaboration between food-related organizations, and external funding available to Flint allowed for effective collaboration that brought in money for new initiatives. However, what is missing is a long-term strategy for a better food system.

There is an important opportunity now to leverage trust that has been built and to be more strategic about what sort of food system Flint residents want. In addition, there is an opportunity for the government to move forward with plans—such as on zoning—developed in the Flint Master Plan that would allow for greater flexibility in terms of food production and marketing in the city.

These findings will be used by the Flint Leverage Points project to better understand the overall resilience of the Flint food system. Understanding the organization of the food system is also important to understanding consumer behaviors, and ways that individuals understand how they can access different services, or how and why those services change over time.

USING THIS RESEARCH

This information has implications for planning and policy. **For government and policy advocacy**, it suggests that there is currently limited Flint city government involvement in the food system. Implementation of Flint Master Plan components related to zoning and other food system issues could help food system actors more effectively produce, distribute, and sell food. In addition, government engagement with food system strategy activities could increase the success of these activities.

For community-based organizations and religious groups serving the Flint community, it suggests a need for transparent coordination and organization to solve food system problems. Building trust is key to food system organization. Based on interviews, the harrowing experience of the Flint Water Crisis did build trust between some organizations. It is important to build on and maintain this trust. This means avoiding competition and duplication of efforts, but instead building partnerships to plan projects and pursue funding.

Finally, this research suggests directions **for creative grantmaking by philanthropic organizations**. While funding often supports implementation of specific projects, funders should consider supporting mechanisms to coordinate existing projects.

About the Flint Leverage Points Project

The Flint Leverage Points Project is a collaboration between researchers and community partners to find ways to change the food system in Flint so that it is more equitable, healthy, and sustainable. The Community Foundation of Greater Flint (CFGF) is partnering with Michigan State University (MSU) to conduct this research. We are advised by a Community Consultative Panel comprised of representatives from the Flint community who work in the food space. We are looking at the whole food system involved in producing, distributing, preparing, eating and recycling food in Flint to find patterns that are keeping it in an undesirable state. We will also identify strengths and opportunities within the food system that could be built upon. This project will produce an analysis of how community partners can intervene in the Flint food system to create positive change. For more information about the project, contact Damon Ross (CFGF) at DRoss@cfgf.org or Chelsea Wentworth (MSU) at wentwo21@msu.edu.