

NEW HAVEN CONNECTICUT, USA

INCORPORATING A FOOD JUSTICE FRAMEWORK IN INTEGRATED FOOD SYSTEM POLICIES

This food policy snapshot is based on an interview with LATHA SWAMY, Director of Food System Policy for the City of New Haven.

GLASGOW
FOOD AND
CLIMATE
DECLARATION

New Haven, Connecticut's food strategy is a unique example of progressive and integrated food policies in the region, in large part due to the work being done by its FOOD SYSTEM POLICY DIVISION (FSPD). The FSPD was established in 2016, following sustained advocacy from community food system advocates and the New Haven Food Policy Council. While New Haven's food programs were previously focused on emergency food relief, an integrated, systems approach to food policy took shape with the appointment of a new Director of Food System Policy in 2018. Following this appointment, a food justice framework was co-developed and mandated by the new director, residents, and staff.

“ Our three thematic priorities are socio-economic justice, health equity, and environmental justice. The core of that really focuses on developing and supporting anti-racist food, farming, and land-use policies, and helping the community manifest their ideas for a sustainable and just food system. ”

ENABLERS

KEY LEADERSHIP APPOINTMENT

Latha Swamy, hired as Director of the Food System Policy Division in 2018, was a key figure in ensuring that an integrated food justice framework was established for the division. Through her previous experience in the health and environmental sectors, she entered the leadership role with high levels of awareness of the interconnected nature of food issues, and the systemic nature of structural violence in the US. Under her leadership, the three priorities of health equity, socio-economic justice, and environmental justice were mandated within the division, with the explicit goal to ensure policies and programs are values-based, justice-centered, integrated, and co-developed with community partners.

COALITION-BUILDING APPROACH

Swamy spent her first year as director of FSPD relationship-building with allies across city departments and throughout the community. This was critical in creating an enabling and equitable policy environment and ensured that multiple city departments were engaged with and committed to food policies. By working with community partners, FSPD programs are horizontally integrated, provide multiple benefits, and are more effective. New Haven's breadth of programs includes work on urban agriculture, public health and sugar reduction, community composting, value-based procurement, and local food entrepreneurship.

MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE

New Haven recognizes that food system actions must also be aligned vertically (between different levels of governance) to accelerate the transition to sustainable food systems. The election of a new mayor in 2020 has helped Swamy further integrate FSPD's policies. In addition to her appointment to NEW HAVEN'S CLIMATE EMERGENCY MOBILIZATION TASKFORCE, at the state level, Swamy serves on Connecticut's WORKING LANDS ALLIANCE Steering Committee, Department of Agriculture's DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION WORKING GROUP, and on the Governor's COUNCIL ON CLIMATE CHANGE. This has opened the door for state departments, like the State Department of Agriculture, to engage with urban food systems. At the national level, Swamy has also been nominated to serve on the first-ever FEDERAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON URBAN AGRICULTURE. These moves signal integration of food policies at multiple levels of governance, legitimizing the integrated nature of FSPD's work, and ensuring that supportive structures for just and sustainable food systems are created for New Haven and other cities to draw on.

PARTICIPATORY PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

To guarantee that FSPD projects are relevant and successful, FSPD strives for community participation and ownership of projects. For example, for the FSPD's urban agriculture project, a formal community advisory board of up to 60 members has been established, with a particular focus on reaching residents that are not affiliated with organizations. Furthermore, funding has been specifically designated to compensate community advisory board members for their time. To capture input beyond board members, the FSPD hosts community meetings in all neighborhoods throughout the City. Surveys are also implemented (in multiple languages and launched at community meetings) to guide project planning processes.

Beyond the city borders, the FSPD is working to formalize the appointment of a group of inter-agency food policy liaisons, the goal of which would be to connect the FSPD with institutions such as university extension agencies who can provide valuable food policy guidance but do not necessarily reside within the city limits.

THE NEW HAVEN FOOD SYSTEM POLICY DIVISION (FSPD)

- The Food System Policy Division (FSPD) operates through a food justice framework across three thematic priorities: health equity, socio-economic justice, and environmental justice, with the aim to develop and support anti-racist food, farming, and land-use policies.
- The FSPD takes a coalition-building approach, creating networks and partnerships at the interdepartmental level, with community institutions, grassroots organizations, and residents.
- The FSPD works on food policy at all levels, from changing practices within organizations and institutions to modifying regulations at a city level, and advocating on legislation at the state and federal levels.

WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE?

Environmental justice connects issues of racism and socioeconomic injustice with environmental issues. It is a recognition of the disproportionate number of environmental burdens experienced by marginalized communities and in turn a centering of the voices of those most impacted by environmental harm. An environmental justice perspective brings to light how systems of structural violence lead to poverty, labor and environmental exploitation, adverse human and ecosystem health impacts, and increased vulnerability to climate change, as well as the historic harm that environmental movements have caused in marginalized communities. Environmental justice guarantees that all people have equal access to a healthy, safe, and sustainable environment, as well as equal protection from environmental harm.

BARRIERS

Despite horizontal and vertical partnership building, New Haven's FSPD still struggles with a lack of awareness and underestimation of integrated food system policies. The organizational structure of the FSPD adds to this problem as it is housed within the Community Services Administration, feeding into the idea that food policy is limited to emergency food aid. This limited view of food policy leads to funding challenges within the city. However, the division has more recently been able to overcome these challenges through successful grant applications from private, state, and federal-level funds.

“ Many people involved in food systems work are really focused on emergency food only. There isn't broader systems thinking. I am widening that lens, widening our partnerships, and bringing system's thinking into this work.”

The New Haven Food System Policy Division is a unique example of a progressive and integrated urban food policy division. The enablers that led to the development of this division were the key appointment of a knowledgeable and progressive leader, the division's coalition-building approach, support and awareness from multiple levels of government, and the division's community-based participatory project development approach.

The overarching objective of the FSPD is to help the community manifest its idea of a just and sustainable food system. To measure results, the FSPD is building a robust monitoring and evaluation framework, drawing from multiple existing frameworks, including the MILAN URBAN FOOD POLICY PACT MONITORING FRAMEWORK, RUAF's CITY REGION FOOD SYSTEM INDICATOR FRAMEWORK, and Michigan State University's RACIAL EQUITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK. Baseline assessments are currently being conducted, and the division is also working with a local organization on community-based participatory research methods to ensure representative community involvement.

