Food Security in Public Health and other Government Programs in British Columbia, Canada:

A Policy Analysis

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This synopsis was written for British Columbians involved in joint food security initiatives with the government.

Abstract

Public Health has re-emerged as a driver of food security in British Columbia. Food security policy, programs and infrastructure have been integrated into the Public Health sector and other areas of government, including the adoption of food security as a Core Public Health program. This policy analysis of the integration merges findings from forty-eight key informant interviews conducted with Government, Civil Society, and Food Supply representatives involved in the initiatives, along with relevant documents and participant/direct observations. Findings were analyzed according to "contextual", "diagnostic", "evaluative" and "strategic" categories from the Ritchie and Spencer framework for Applied Policy Research.

While Civil Society was the driver for food security in British Columbia, Public Health was the driver for the integration of food security into the government. Public Health held most of the power, and often determined the agenda and the players involved. While many interviewees heralded the accomplishments of the incorporation of food security into Public Health, stakeholders also acknowledged the relative insignificance of the food security agenda in relation to other "weightier", competing agendas. Conflict between stakeholders over approaches to food insecurity/hunger existed, and it was only weakly included in the agenda.

Looking to consequences of the integration, food security increased in legitimacy within the Public Health sector over the research period. Interviewees described a clash of cultures between Public Health and Civil Society occurring partly as a result of Public Health's limited food security mandate and inherent top down approach. Marginalization of the Civil Society voice at the provincial level was one of the negative consequences resulting from this integration. A social policy movement toward a new political paradigm - "regulatory pluralism" - calls for greater engagement of Civil Society, and for all sectors to work together toward common goals. This integration of food security into the government exemplifies an undertaking on the cutting edge in progress toward this shift.

Recommendations for stakeholders in furthering food security within the government were identified. These include the development of food security policy alternatives for current government agendas in British Columbia, with a focus on health care funding, Aboriginal health and climate change.

CONTENTS

What was the Research About?

A number of food security health promotion initiatives were introduced into the provincial government in British Columbia (BC) in the mid-2000s – such as the introduction of food security as a Core Public Health program, the Community Food Action Initiative, and the School Fruit and Vegetable Snack program (Seed, 2011, Figure 1.1). Examination of this grouping of initiatives through a policy framework allowed for a comprehensive view of the integration.

My motivation for this research came from my involvement in these processes in BC. I wanted to understand the deeper meanings and nuances of this integration, as well as how BC related the larger socio-political context. I also wanted some insight on how to improve on the processes, and how best to move forward; the need for this type of analysis was reinforced by many of the interviewees.

How was the Research Done?

This qualitative policy analysis of the integration analyzes findings from forty-eight key informant interviews conducted in British Columbia with Government, Civil Society, and Food Supply representatives involved in the initiatives. It also merges findings from relevant documents (55+) and the researcher's observations (as participant and observer).

Research objectives and questions were matched to Ritchie and Spencer's (1994) framework for applied policy research. This framework provided a structure for the research questions, and guided the analysis of the findings.

Research Objectives	Research Questions (abridged)	Policy Analysis Concepts (*Ritchie and Spencer classification in italics)
A. Develop a policy map of key players, processes and drivers of food security in BC Public Health and partner initiatives.	- What food security initiatives have emerged in BC Public Health and government? - What are the relationships and mediating factors between players involved? - What were the drivers of the integration of these initiatives?	*Contextual* - scope of public policy - policy means or instruments - actors and institutions *Diagnostic* (Drivers)
B. Describe if and how the integration of food security has shifted discourse, practice and power in BC.	- What are the consequences of the initiatives? - Has Public Health engaged civil society? - Have stakeholders or issues lost or gained power? - What were barriers and facilitators?	*Evaluative* - Actors - Institutions - Distributional dimensions (who and what benefits and loses; consequences) - What supports or limits success or failure?
C. What are the implications for the role of Public Health in food security in BC ?	- What strategic recommendations can be made to facilitate the further integration of food security into BC Public Health or government policies and programs (if further integration into government desired)? - What lessons were learned?	*Strategic*

What Were the Core Findings?

Research findings outlined in Dissertation Chapters 5-8 (Seed, 2011) were analyzed according to the Ritchie and Spencer's policy concepts of *"contextual", "diagnostic", "evaluative" and "strategic".* The discussion built upon these findings, analyzing them through the lens of the three research objectives.

A. Policy Map of Food Security in BC

A diagram of government initiatives and lead departments reviewed is presented in the thesis (Seed, 2011, Figure 1.1). Lang's (2005) food policy triangle was useful in the research in examining relationships and power distribution between the actors and institutions; however, interviewees found it too crude. A new Policy Map is outlined (see Appendix), reflecting a more dynamic relationship between the sectors, and proposing a coordinating space where mutual agendas can be pursued.

And while civil society was the driver of food security in BC, Public Health was the key driver in the integration – as players, and in process and content.

> *"The big picture piece is that they can't sustain the health care budget ... we'd better start getting people healthier, because we really can't afford the whole sick people piece." 37, Civil Society*

This can be described as a re-emergence of Public Health as a driver in food security and food policy, as Public Health was first identified as a driver in food security during the 1930's world food movement when the marriage of health and agriculture was first proposed (Seed, 2011, 2.2). However, with Public Health as the lead, their agenda and limitations (Seed, 2011, Table 7.2) determined approaches to food security. This led to a clash of cultures with civil society:

> *"There is some concern that the grassroots emphasis on the larger issues in terms of food security could be co-opted, or is in some cases being co-opted by the health authorities who have their own agenda which is a health agenda, it is health promotion ... As opposed to the food systems issues. So there's, we're uneasy allies sometimes." 4, Public Health*

> *"So I think that, at least in my experience was that there was a clash of priorities there ... I think that an initiative that is looking at ultimately supporting communities in achieving food security might take on activities or directions that may not necessarily serve solely the Regional Health Authorities as an organization." 6, Civil Society*

Civil Society emphasis on "how" food security is achieved - through democracy, food sovereignty and control of food systems - was viewed to be as important as "what" was achieved. The "clash of cultures" suggests that the integration of food security into Public Health challenges the boundaries of Public Health practice to shift to a more ecological and democratic approach.

B. Did the Integration of Food Security into the Government Shift Discourse, Power and Practice in BC?

This "clash of cultures" was also demonstrated in the marginalization of some segments of Civil Society from participation in provincial initiatives. Interviewees warned that this restricted both the broad source of expertise which informed the integration and the political base for further integration.

> *"There was just to me a sense of potential exclusion, you know, of some of the grassroots community mobilizers … And so to me you can't afford that kind of luxury, that kind of elitism." 41, Public Health*

Looking to other consequences of the integration, many interviewees heralded the accomplishments of the incorporation of food security into Public Health, and some legitimization of food security did occur within Public Health. However, stakeholders also acknowledged the relative insignificance of the food security agenda in relation to other "weightier", competing agendas.

> *"So, I think the programs are important, I think they are good, but if the mainstream policy is diametrically opposed to them, I think the long term consequences are more problematic." 2, Civil Society*

This was highlighted by the introduction of the meat inspection regulation at the time of the interviews – which many interviewees saw as undermining the food security agenda. This introduction also stoked tensions within Public Health between Food Security and Food Protection staff, some of whom had differing perspectives on the regulation.

> *"I'm thinking of the meat regulations when they came down … what happens now, is that often times we have the health authorities speaking negatively about something that the health authorities are enforcing. That is not a good message for anybody. That doesn't get us anywhere. And if we are spending our time doing that, we're really not spending our time getting the right stuff done." 12, Public Health*

Finally, conflict between stakeholders over approaches to food insecurity/hunger existed, and it was only weakly included in the agenda:

> *"It still puzzles me particularly given that the hunger agenda was there and the next thing it's not there and it was so diluted, I am kind of wondering what happened?" 9, Public Health*

Identified Barriers to Addressing Food Insecurity/Hunger

- Fear that current approaches are not effective, may divert focus from valid solutions.
- Concern that non-government efforts lead to downloading of problem.
- Tension between universal and targeted approaches.
- Perception that it is "too political" for governments.
- Concern that may take away from the mainstreaming of food security.
- Lack of understanding of the connection between food security and food insecurity/hunger.

C. Implications and Recommendations

Examination of the final objective, looking at implications for stakeholders, builds upon the two themes that emerged from interviewee recommendations - "Work Together" and "Be Strategic".

Work Together

> *"Well, I think the lesson that we've learned is that everybody has a role... That these big issues can't be solved by one sector. Yeah, I think that's the lesson that we learned. That if any of us are trying to solve the problem independently, we're not going to get there!" 37, Civil Society*

The notion of "Work Together" is elucidated with specific recommendations from interviewees:

Strategic Recommendation: Work Together

- Formalize structures and relationships (e.g. intersectoral food policy council).
- Develop mutual agendas.
- Study barriers, mediators and stakeholder limitations and agendas.
- Determine government commitment to engaging Civil Society; if desired, build Civil Society capacity to enable more effective participation.
- Define and delineate roles.
- Build personal relationships.
- Ease tensions between Public Health Food Security and Food Protection.

Implications for "Work Together" are also examined through the lens of a societal policy shift toward a reconfiguration of the balance between policy stakeholders; this policy shift is being played out in this integration of food security into BC policies and programs.

Specifically, the ActNow BC declaration that all ministries and to some extent industry, need to work toward a greater goal of public health in order to address upwardly spiralling health care costs is an example of this redesign of state role. Gunningham et al. (2002, p. 5) refer to this type of policy-making as "regulatory pluralism", where the "government harness(es) the capacities of markets, civil soceity and other institutions to accomplish its policy goals more effectively, with greater social acceptance, and at less cost to the state". Additionally, Civil Society in BC would argue that their goals - and meaningful participation - need to be integrated into government goals in this reconfiguration. Moving toward this would require the government to commit to a greater engagement of civil society. Supporting capacity building at that level, finding ways to share power, and articulation of agendas and limitations could boost their intentions, as could a more conciliatory approach from Civil Society.

Inclusion of the food supply sector – specifically with stakeholders who have agendas that align with public and environmental health - is also seen as essential. While interviewee recommendations were not specific on strategies, the 1930s concept of a marriage of health and agriculture can map an approach. Direction on food policies contributing to population health can be drawn from international documents and acted upon at the appropriate level. Interviewees identified municipal food policy as an area of potential in BC for integrating differing agendas.

Be Strategic

Interviewees put forward the notion of approaching food security initiatives in BC from a broader, more comprehensive perspective.

"So these are great initiatives, but …there is not a holistic approach to it…" 10, Civil Society

"I really do wish someone would have a bigger picture. Maybe somebody has a vision, but they can't implement it" 1, Public Health

They also provided other specific recommendations:

Strategic Recommendation: Be Strategic

- Align with other agendas (government, organizational, media, public), but don't link initiatives to political agendas.
- Create, integrate, and analyze policy options.
- Research other effective models.
- Focus, don't dilute.
- Build evidence based outcomes *and* stories.
- Nurture champions and leadership.
- Establish long term commitment to funding and initiatives.
- Increase awareness of competing agendas and "bigger picture".
- Planned analysis and approach.
- Study links between food security and food insecurity; complete cost analysis on health impacts of food insecurity.

Conclusion

British Columbia has taken a lead in Canada regarding the integration of food security within the provincial government. In addition to offering recommendations for advancing food security within the government in BC, this research documents the process and examines the range of stakeholder perspectives in BC. Further, it situates the integration within the broader socio-political context, thus

allowing a greater understanding of what happened and why. This thesis also adds value to the greater research body; this is outlined within the dissertation (Seed, 2011, 10.2).

Finally, I would like to thank the 48 interviewees who provided their incredible insight for this research.

Overview: Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Stakeholders in British Columbia
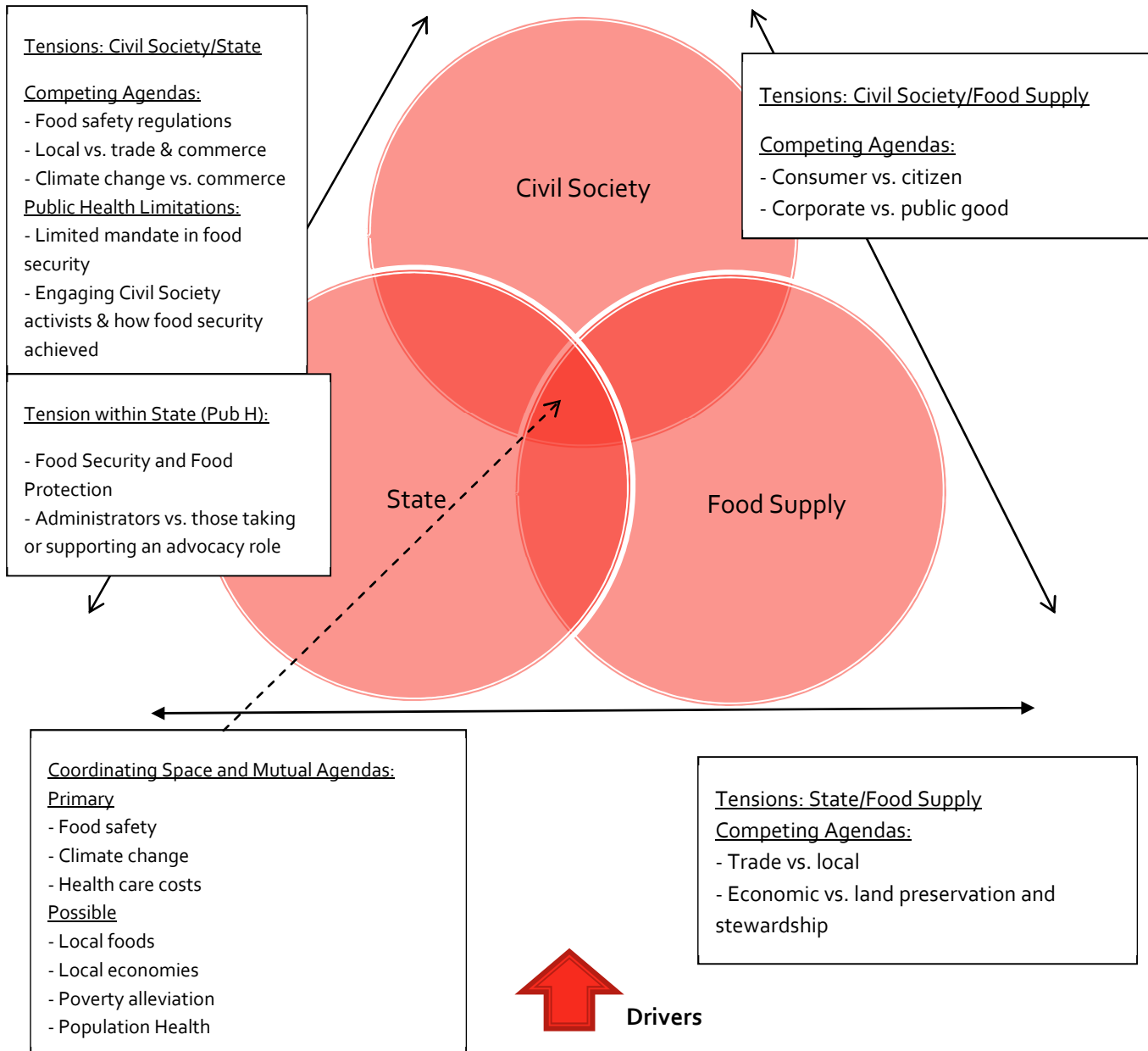
- Arguments for food security could be better positioned within current BC government agendas (e.g. health care funding, Aboriginal Health and climate change), and should include corresponding policy alternatives.
- The concept of regulatory pluralism may be helpful to reconfigure relationships between, and engage government, civil society and food supply sectors in working toward mutual goals to advance food security.
- Definitions are only a starting point. Stakeholders with the most power determine agendas. A greater transparency and understanding of stakeholder agendas and limitations could improve relationships.
- The Population Health Template (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2001) is a useful tool in defining Public Health roles in food security in BC.
- Conflict between stakeholders over approaches to food insecurity/hunger requires a commitment from a broader range of players to analyze, study and discuss workable responses that move beyond alleviation.
- Future plans should be comprehensive, and structures formalized.
- The newly generated Policy map (Appendix) provides an emerging template for understanding and analyzing factors influencing food security in BC.

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Appendix

A Policy Map of Food Security Government Health Promotion Initiatives in British Columbia (Seed, 2011, Figure 9.1)

Tensions: Civil Society/State

Competing Agendas:
- Food safety regulations
- Local vs. trade & commerce
- Climate change vs. commerce
Public Health Limitations:
- Limited mandate in food security
- Engaging Civil Society activists & how food security achieved

Tension within State (Pub H):

- Food Security and Food Protection
- Administrators vs. those taking or supporting an advocacy role

Tensions: Civil Society/Food Supply

Competing Agendas:
- Consumer vs. citizen
- Corporate vs. public good

Civil Society

State

Food Supply

Coordinating Space and Mutual Agendas:
Primary
- Food safety
- Climate change
- Health care costs
Possible
- Local foods
- Local economies
- Poverty alleviation
- Population Health

Tensions: State/Food Supply
Competing Agendas:
- Trade vs. local
- Economic vs. land preservation and stewardship

Drivers

- Health concerns: obesity; diabetes & associated funding crisis; food safety
- Public Health renewal in Canada & BC: Public Health Core Programs; Act Now BC
- High and Low level government champions
- Rising concerns re poverty
- Climate change
- ActNow BC, federal government and NGO food security funding
- Media
- Civil Society interest & activity in food security