



Towards institutional fit? The reality of institutional capacity through two food security exemplars



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ABSTRACT

Global challenges face many local governments, which in turn, need to rapidly build their capacity to respond. Local government requires alignment with organizational partners, higher levels of government, external societal actors and local constituents, through the concept of institutional fit, to acquire the capacity to respond to global challenges. Institutional fit discursively enables local government to increase its reach and collective capacity. We analysed institutional fit in two local government case studies in Australia that aimed to improve food security through addressing equity and other social aspects to the challenge. Case study analysis was based on in-depth interviews, primary document analysis and secondary data analysis pertaining to the food security initiatives. Findings show that collaborative partnerships can provide greater understanding of the goals, roles and higher-level commitment needed for institutional fit. Aligning capacities and roles between and within organizations and institutions is also required because local government is severely restricted without whole-of-institutional commitment to similar goals. We found, however, that local government is constrained in its response to change because of the complex nature of the challenge and because neoliberalism militates against fit within the wider domain of the entire institutional response. We argue that institutional fit needs to be embedded within any change process. More nuanced and targeted understandings of the roles of each organization can then be understood, along with the role of power within the institutional domain, so that appropriate planning occurs to identify and target which responses are achieved and by whom.

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1. Introduction

Local government capacity to respond to complex global change is constrained by inadequate relationships between different government levels, and the inability to examine their own capacity to address global challenges. The capacity of authorities working at the local municipal level varies from council to council, but mostly these institutions need to articulate with other institutional actors to achieve the collective capacity needed to respond to the enormity of global change. Such articulation infers the idea of institutional fit between organizations and institutions (van de Meene et al., 2009). The concept of institutional fit has been applied to international development (Batley and Larbi, 2004) and ecosystems management (Folke et al., 2007; Trembl et al., 2015) research, but there is limited analysis of whether and how public sector organizations achieve institutional fit, prior to effecting sustainable outcomes in new initiatives.

Australia is seen globally as a food secure country due to its excess in agricultural production and its corresponding export

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activity; however, research and evidence-based practice reveals there are citizens who are food insecure and suffer diet and lifestyle-related diseases (Farmor-Bowers et al., 2013a). Ideally, the role of government is to activate, organize and manage new responses (Farmor-Bowers et al., 2013b) through legislation, policies, regulation, funding and programs. Yet the jurisdictional boundaries to which government responses apply are often unclear and there are limited regulatory and policy tools available (Mendes, 2008).

The purpose of this article is to untangle and highlight the (mis) alignment or institutional 'fit' of local government internally, and with other organizations, institutions, and external actors in society, which is required to attain the necessary collective capacity to respond to global matters of concern. This article uses institutional fit as the organizing construct to analyse both the internal fit of departments within local government, and its external alignment with partners and higher government levels, within two food security initiatives designed to enhance food security within their respective municipalities. While this article acknowledges the critical importance of the broader conceptualisation of governance as involving active relationships between the state, the private sector and civil society, and the role of different government levels, it

specifically focuses on local government's capacity to respond as the closest level of government to food security impacts within communities.

Australia has three levels of government – national (federal), state and local. Both the federal and state governments have the mandated power to address food regulations, while traditionally, local governments are involved in food policy through their role in environmental health, food safety and community food services. Food policy *per se* is dispersed across wider macroeconomic and microeconomic policies, financial regulation, infrastructure provision, and trade practices regulation, as well as health and welfare systems (DAFF, 2011). This fragmented silo approach to food security across government allows inconsistencies, overlap and gaps to exist in the absence of integration and coordination of food security, resulting in policy decisions at one level or in one area having significant ramifications in other food security areas (PMSEIC, 2010; DAFF, 2011).

Local government is not recognised in the Australian federal constitution but is given power through Local Government Acts that are respectively legislated by six states and two territories. This system creates eight different types of local government in practice. The different mandates in individual states and territories produce a continuous state of change in the expectations and roles of local government (Dollery et al., 2003). In practice, there remains 'a relatively small and weak local government level' with limited downwards devolution of power from the states (Aulich, 2005: 194), exacerbated by the reliance of local government on resources from both Federal and State government in order to meet their commitments. At the same time local government human service responsibilities have increased (Bell, 2007) while revenue has decreased.

Local government capacity to respond to complex issues is not only severely restricted by this constantly changing system but the history of neoliberal corporate-style efficiency measures. These measures have seen fast-paced and far-reaching systemic changes to local government structures and processes, but simultaneously increased responsibility for developing responses to multifaceted problems, such as food security, because of the immediate needs of their municipalities, lack of agreed ownership of the problem, or a legislative mandate to respond (Mendes, 2007).

Unlike other Australian local governments, municipalities in the Australian state of Victoria are legislatively required to develop a *Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan*, which sets strategic health priorities to be actioned over a four-year cycle. These plans may include food security goals and strategies (Slade, 2013). Additional funding and human resources to work in partnership with community groups is available at times to boost food security efforts. Despite the advantages of partnerships, all local governments in Australia struggle to gain critical mass of effort, through their internal and external institutional fit, to respond to challenges such as food security, given the systemic governance obstructions introduced by established neoliberal ideologies and practices (Trist, 1983; Gray, 1989; Sindall, 1997; Geddes, 2000; Adger et al., 2001; Mowbray, 2011).

2. Local Government Involvement in Food Security

Food security¹ is a contemporary and complex global issue that tests institutional capacity across government. Key food security

challenges include consistent food availability, equitable access to food, the social and cultural acceptability of available food, and the adequacy of a sustainable food system (Koç et al., 1999; Mendes, 2008; Reynolds, 2009; Rocha and Lessa, 2009; Sonnino, 2009). Recent global food-related developments, such as the 2007–08 spike in food prices that resulted in food riots across the world; the impacts of climate change and conflicts over land to ensure food security; and rapidly increasing urbanization, demonstrate the complexity of food security problems (Morgan, 2009). Self-regulating, neoliberal, market-driven food systems are inept in meeting these complex challenges (Rosin et al., 2012). Further, policies and regulations that shape governmental, private enterprise and civil decision-making across food systems (Slade and Wardell-Johnson, 2013) require consideration of the health, environmental, social and cultural aspects of food security as well as their economic value (Lang et al., 2009). The impacts of such challenges are often evidenced at a local government level (Agranoff, 2014).

Research linking local government capacity and community food security is embryonic in Australia, unlike 'hotspots' in developed and developing regions around the world where municipal governments are implementing innovative and integrated food policies and programs. For example, the adoption of food policy by the City of Vancouver (Mendes, 2006, 2008), the development of the London Food Strategy (Reynolds, 2009), and the pioneering work of the Toronto Food Policy Council (Blay-Palmer, 2009) provide valuable insights into the policy enablers and challenges for local government. Innovative practices and early adoption of local government approaches to food security are most evident in developing regions and highlight the role of local government in urban agriculture in Argentina (Lattuca et al., 2005), equitable urban food provisioning in Brazil (see Rocha and Lessa, 2009), and in addressing 'food deserts' through urban food production Tanzania (Sonnino, 2009).

There is a fast growing body of literature informing how local government is enabled and constrained in its food-related initiatives. For example, Reynolds (2009) reports that while the *London Food Strategy 2006* takes a holistic, sustainability approach to food security and has identified current sectoral problems, the situation 'on the ground' has not really changed because the government does not consider food as its service responsibility. In Belo Horizonte, Brazil, local government drives integrated food security policies and food programs designed on social justice and equitable access to healthy food, yet Rocha and Lessa (2009) observe that despite the wide-spread benefit of this work, changes in government are still a potential threat to its continuance.

Recent research by Hatfield (2012) interviewing 15 municipal food policy professionals in North America found common areas of work across local governments, including access and equity; economic development, environmental sustainability; food education; local and regional food; mobile vending; nutrition and public health; policy advocacy; urban agriculture; and waste management. Common challenges identified by participants were lack of funding for programs, the location of the program within the organizational structure which affected priorities and effectiveness, determining policy priorities and evaluation mechanisms, and difficulties in engaging other departments in the work (see also Mansfield and Mendes, 2013). An initial analysis of local and regional Canadian government involvement in food-related change by MacRae and Donahue (2013) recommends clarifying jurisdictional connection to food policy, and definition of how different partners policy domains link to municipal policy work. Consequently, food security is used as an exemplar global challenge in this research to highlight the problem of fit between government levels. In particular, two case studies of food security initiatives are used to examine institutional fit from the focal point of local government.

¹ The recent reiteration of the definition from the Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) states that 'food security exists when all people at all times have both physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs for an active and healthy life' (2011: n.p.). Given the municipal context of this paper the seminal definition of community food security (CFS) by Bellows and Hamm is also relevant as it explains that CFS 'exists when all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice' (2002: 35).

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