

What is policy?

The word policy is often frightening to people. Sometimes this is because we don't understand policy.

What does policy mean?

In short, policies simply guide our actions. Policies can be guidelines, rules, regulations, laws, principles, or directions. They say what is to be done, who is to do it, how it is to be done and for (or to) whom it is to be done. Most of us think that we have no control over policies and that they are issues our elected officials and bureaucrats deal with. Well, this is not true. The world is full of policies—for example, families make policies like “No TV until homework is done”. Agencies and organizations make policies that guide the way they operate. Stores have return policies. Workplaces have policies about things like sick days. Schools have policies that describe the way they expect children to behave.

Policy occurs at various levels and points of interaction—personal, organizational, and public.

If we use the right strategies we can be successful in influencing all aspects of policy.

The following section will help to clear up some of the questions you may have about policies and will hopefully allow you to see the many different ways you can be involved with changing policies to increase food security in your community.



Key Term

Policy

“A plan of action agreed to by a group of people with the power to carry it out and enforce it.”

Devon Dodd and Hébert-Boyd, 2000

A Policy is... A guide for action

What policies do ...

- Outline rules
- Provide principles that guide actions
- Set roles and responsibilities
- Reflect values and beliefs
- State an intention to do something

Adapted from "Rural Communities Impacting Policy—A Workbook", 2005

Why a policy may have to be developed or changed:

- Basic needs are not being met
- People have been treated unfairly
- Current policies or laws are not enforced or effective
- Proposed changes in policies and laws would be harmful
- Existing or emerging conditions pose a threat to public health, safety, education or well-being

Adapted from Health Communication Unit of the Centre for Health Promotion, University of Toronto, 2004

Personal policy

Personal policy is the set of standards you use to guide your own decisions and actions. Despite our best efforts, economic realities can sometimes make it difficult to carry out personal policies. For example, you may want to buy from local stores, but Wal-Mart[®] is the only store you can get to without a car.

One theme that came out of our story-sharing workshops in Nova Scotia reflects a personal policy (and economic reality) of many families—first pay the bills to ensure transportation to work, a roof over their heads, and heat in their homes, then worry about food. It has often been found that although food is necessary for survival, the money for food is the most flexible portion of a family's budget and so is the part that gets cut to meet other needs.

Voices



"We don't see how much power we have as consumers—we've [just] bought into the [Big Grocery Chain] model—Sure it takes more time, it takes more effort to get to a farmer's market or go to a small retailer, but that's the direction that we have to take in order to promote an alternative solution to [the way things are]. It's a matter of saying "hey, we want this healthy, real, wholesome, [local] food to be available to all people."

"As a personal policy I am only going to buy local produce to support local farmers and the local economy."



While some people are able to make the choice to buy local foods or organic foods, unfortunately not everyone can. It is important to recognize and be sensitive to this when talking about personal policy. Focusing on individual choice may not be the best approach to take when addressing some food security issues. Alternative strategies aimed at reducing inequities within society and systems that enable full participation are needed in order for everyone to exercise their own personal policies.

Organizational policy

Organizational policy guides how organizations and businesses operate. Unlike public policy, which often has opportunities for public input, organizational policies are often made out of public view. The internal policies of a surprising number of businesses and organizations can have an impact on food security—for example, supermarkets, food banks, food processors, trucking companies, and land developers.

The following examples show how organizational policy can affect food security.



Organizational Policy in Action (1)

Oxford Regional High School in Nova Scotia has instituted the Cumberland County School Food Project to provide healthy, fresh, local foods in the school. The program is designed to increase access to healthy foods for the students, and build and support a local food system—thus moving toward a healthier community and local economic development.

Cumberland County School Food Project, 2003

Organizational Policy in Action (2)

The Ontario Association of Food Banks developed a program to salvage potentially wasted food. The food is made into soup by “chefs in training”—19 former street youth interested in developing cooking and job skills. The soups are frozen and trucked to food banks across Ontario.

Ontario Association of Food Banks, 2003

Public policy

All levels of government—federal, provincial, and municipal—create policies to address specific issues or problems. These *public policies* are developed through a process that involves input from citizens, government staff, and elected officials.



Have Your Say

Until recently, policy has been a “top-down” process where decisions are made at the top, passed down to the organizations or groups responsible for implementing the policy, and finally reach the people who are affected by the policy. Within this traditional approach to policy development, citizens involvement has been limited to elections, referenda, speaking out at legislative hearings, surveys and polls, advocacy, and town hall meetings. Recently, however, the federal and provincial governments in Canada have signed the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA), a commitment to working more collaboratively with individuals, families, communities, voluntary organizations, business and labour to develop public policy. SUFA requires that citizens be engaged in setting priorities and directions, decision making, and reviewing and evaluating the results and impacts of policy.

SUFA gives us all the opportunity—as individuals and communities—to influence the policy development process and to take part in creating good public policy to address the issues that impact on our lives, our communities and everyone’s food security.

For more information on SUFA please visit:

www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/rma/account/sufa-ecus_e.asp

Key Term

Public Policy

The broad framework of ideas and values within which decisions are taken and action, or inaction, is pursued by governments in relation to some issue or problem

Brooks, 1989

As the examples below show, public policy can have a profound impact on people's lives. Sometimes this impact is positive, other times it may be negative. The two examples below show that public policy can have both positive and negative impacts on food security.



Public Policy in Action (1)

In Nova Scotia, parents who were on income assistance got the child tax benefit, a combination of benefits from federal and provincial programs. At the same time the provincial government eliminated the income assistance allowance (family allowance) for children. In the end, the tax benefit intended to help families with children offers very little additional help to parents on income assistance.

Public Policy in Action (2)

The provincial government in New Brunswick decided to allow parents on income assistance to receive the usual income assistance allowances for themselves and their children AND receive their child tax benefits from the federal and provincial governments.

A study that looked at food insecurity among low-income lone mothers in Atlantic Canada found that mothers in New Brunswick were the least likely to experience food insecurity. The mothers who participated in Nova Scotia were three times more likely to experience food insecurity.

McIntyre et al, 2002



“They don’t give you money for your child anymore. It’s all on your child tax [benefit].”

Policy tools

Once a policy has been decided upon, many different methods can be used to implement it. These are sometimes called **policy tools** and include: information, education, legislation, regulation, guidelines, standards, procedures, programs, grants, subsidies, expenditures, taxes, and/or public ownership.

The following example shows the way policy tools could be used to implement a policy on land use. Note that this example is an illustration and not an actual policy.

Example: Green Space for Community Gardens

An urban municipality has developed a policy to increase green space for urban food production in order to encourage community gardens that increase food self-reliance, improve fitness, contribute to a cleaner environment, and enhance community development.

Possible policy tools

- Information** An information package on organizing, operating and sustaining community gardens will be developed and made available for distribution to community groups, housing associations and developments, non-profit organizations, businesses, and public sector offices throughout the city.
- Education** Public health educators and city planners will be engaged to work collaboratively to design an educational program on the benefits of preserving green space for food production targeted at private landowners, including developers, business operators, and home owners.
- Legislation** A minimum of 25% of current public green space will be available for urban food production within each voting district of the municipality.
- Regulation** The development of unused or vacant land, or the redevelopment of land for public purposes will be required to maintain a certain percentage of that land for green space, and a minimum of 25% of the green space will be available for urban food production.

Guidelines	Guidelines will be developed for proper and sustainable urban food production practices and will be mandated for all public green space used or converted to a community garden or other urban food production purpose.
Standards	Future land development in the municipality will consider a minimal standard of designated green space. All development and redevelopment should abide by this policy.
Procedures	Standard procedures will be established for starting a community garden on public green space.
Programs	Programs will be implemented through the combined efforts of the Departments of Public Health and Urban Planning within public institutions, including schools, libraries, municipal offices, and hospitals, to start and maintain public gardens with the support of the staff and interested citizens of those institutions.
Grants	The “Community Garden Development Grant” will be established to provide one-time start-up grants to community groups committed to starting community gardens.
Subsidies	Wage subsidies will be made available for supporting a paid staff position for established (3 or more years in operation) community gardens of 100 or more plots.
Expenditures	A minimum of one new municipal position will be created for a Green Space Coordinator who will oversee the implementation of this policy.
Taxes	Property taxes will be increased where private land development or redevelopment does not comply with the regulations of this policy. (Note this does not apply to current private land unless it is being redeveloped).
Public Ownership	Public green space converted for use in urban food production by community groups will thereafter be considered under shared public ownership between the municipality and the community group; future decision-making regarding the space will be done so collaboratively.

Not all policies require this many policy tools for implementation! Depending on the kind of policy being considered and the level at which it is implemented, you may need only a few.