A Guide to Visioning and Q methodology in Food Systems

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Throughout the United States, urban food systems are in sub-optimal states that are not operating efficiently or equitably and thus do not support food security for all. Creating change to a more sustainable and desirable state first requires acknowledging the different values of diverse groups within a city. Then these diverse values can be used to explore pluralistic pathways to desirable futures that maximize benefits for multiple stakeholders. We outline a process to integrate visioning and Q-methodology to achieve an inclusive understanding of values as priorities for a desirable food system. This approach empowers communities by giving them voice in the planning process but also allows decision makers to create pathways that more accurately reflect the needs of the various subsets of community members who hold diverse visions and priorities.
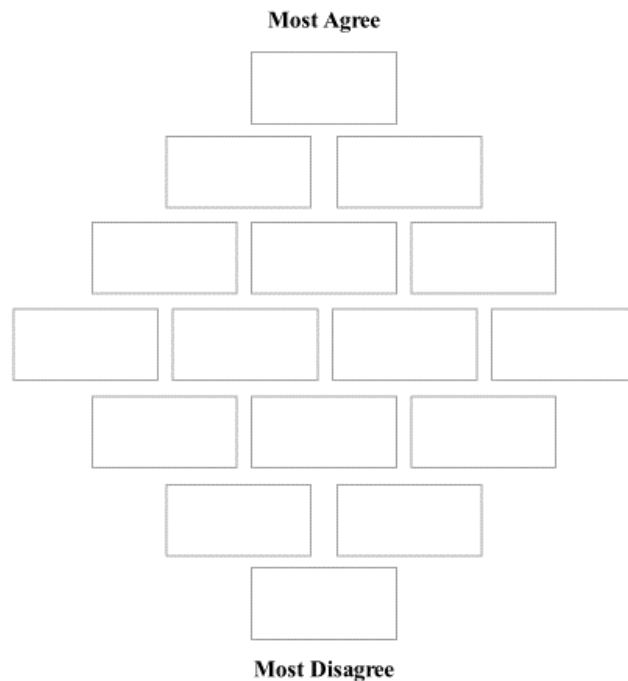
Visioning

Visioning is a method used for understanding desirable futures based on stakeholder feedback and has become popular in both academia, the public sector, and industry, especially since the early 1980s (Cornish, 2004). However, the advent of community led visioning occurred in the mid-1990s and prioritized local ownership of the visioning process (McCann, 2001; Shipley, 2000). The process, usually involving a collaborative discussion or focus group, results in multiple iterations of a desired future, representing the diverse values of different stakeholders. Acknowledging and valuing the different ideas of diverse groups within the community is a crucial piece of this process because it supports the creation of solutions that maximize benefits for multiple stakeholders. This protocol is designed to inspire discussion about desirable futures in urban food systems. In order to achieve this, questions include prompts about food system activities within the main sectors in urban areas: production, distribution, and consumption (Ericksen, 2008). These questions can be tailored to specific stakeholders based on their relationship with the food system.

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Urban Food System Visioning Protocol

Food System Component	Activity	Question
General		What do you appreciate most about the current food system and why?
		Think about the food system in the past (Clarify temporal boundaries if necessary). What has worked well? What has not worked well?
		Imagine X in 20 years in the future and all your hopes for the food system have been realized. What is different about the food system?
Production	Urban Agriculture	Is urban agriculture a part of your desirable future? If urban agriculture is a part of your desirable future, what benefits do you see it bringing to X?
Distribution	Retail	Is there anything you wish you could change about consumers' experience of obtaining food? Think specifically about where and how people get food.
		What types of food do you want to see available in the retail sector in a desirable food system?
	Emergency Food Assistance	What role do you think food pantries, food banks, or soup kitchens will have in your desirable future? To what extent do you see the population of X depending on these services in your desirable future?
		What is necessary to improve how food pantries, food banks, or soup kitchens function in the food system?
		What resources replace those provided by these access points?
Consumption	Food Availability	Is there anything you wish you could change about your experience of obtaining food? Think specifically about where and how you get food.
	Food Access	Is there anything you wish you could change about the price of food?
	Food Utilization	Is there anything you wish you could change about how healthy your food is?
	Food Waste	What would you change about how you manage food waste?
General		What are the barriers to achieving this desirable food system?
		Reflecting on our discussion today, what things have we discussed are most important to address in order to achieve a desirable future for the X food system? Is there anything that you can think of that we have not covered in this discussion?

Q Methodology

The goal of Q methodology is to explore subjectivities within groups (Stephenson, 1954). In an interview or focus group, individuals rank a list of statements or values in order of which they agree with most (Brodt et al., 2006), known as the *Q sorting exercise*. The structure on which participants are asked to rank values is below. The values that participants rank are often pulled from relevant literature and researcher expertise. ***The integration of visioning identifies values from the participants and reflects the values of the community in question.***

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Most Agree

Most Disagree

Once participants have completed the Q sorting exercise, researchers have several choices for software to use for data analysis. PQmethod, based in fortran, requires users to manually enter their data but has pre-coded functions available for Q methodology analysis. This software is potentially more accessible for individuals less familiar with statistical software. Researchers can also input their data into R using csv files. The qmethod package in R by Aoira Zabala requires some familiarity with the software but can be learned using the R manual (Zabala, 2018).

Citations

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