

Food System Plan National Convening Evaluation Report



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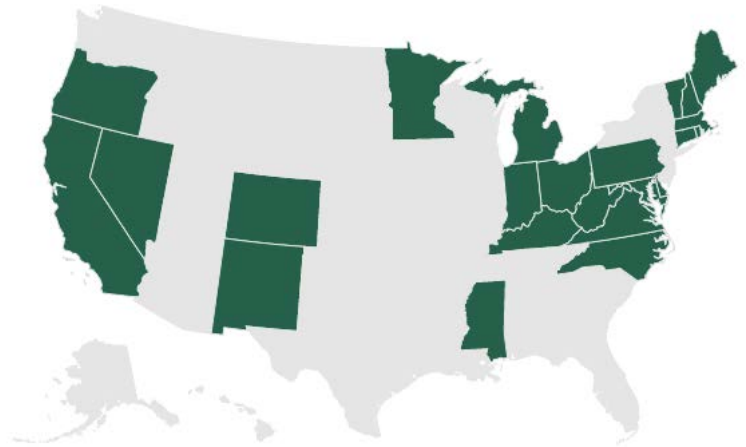
The Michigan State University (MSU) Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) hosted an invitation-only, three-day gathering for food system plan leaders who are working towards or supporting food system plans, primarily at the state level. The convening took place September 17-19, 2019 in Detroit, Michigan. The goals of the convening were to:

- Establish or strengthen relationships with funders and practitioners around the country.
- Share learnings around key aspects of developing and implementing a state level food system plan.
- Identify current and potential funding streams for food system plan coordination.
- Gather ideas for continued co-learning opportunities.

A total of 70 people participated in the convening, which included five funders and representatives from 24 states and regions. The convening evaluation survey was completed by 36 representatives from twenty states and two regions for a 51% response rate.¹

Over three quarters (78%) of survey respondents identified as female, and almost all (86%) held a graduate or professional degree. The vast majority of survey respondents (92%) identified as white. A few people (8%) identified as of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, and 1% identified as black or African American.

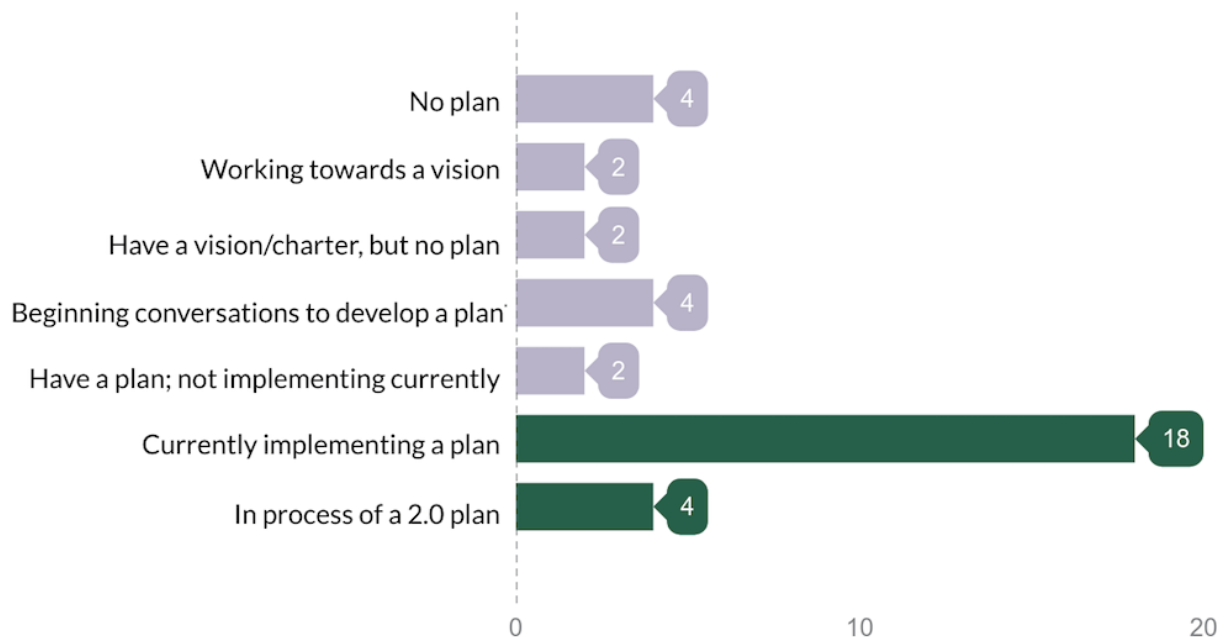
The convening survey was completed by
representatives from 20 states and 2 regions



¹California, Colorado (x2), Connecticut, Indiana (x2), Kentucky, Maryland (x2), Massachusetts, Michigan (x3), Minnesota, Mississippi, Nevada (x2), New Hampshire (x2), New Mexico (x2), North Carolina (x2), Ohio, Oregon (x2), Pennsylvania, Rhode Island (x2), Vermont (x2), Virginia (x2), Chesapeake region (PA, MD, DE, WV, VA, DC), and New England region (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont).

Half (18, 50%) of survey respondents indicated that they are currently implementing a food systems plan. Several (4, 11%) respondents reported that they do not currently have a food systems plan, and another 4 (11%) are beginning conversations to develop a food systems plan. Another two people (6%) said that they have a food systems plan but are not currently implementing it. Of the 8 people who indicated “other,” four (11%) of them are in the process of developing a “2.0 plan,” (the second phase of the food system plan, after the timeline of the initial plan has expired) two of them are working towards a vision, and two of them have a vision, but no plan.

Half of attendees represented states that are currently implementing a food systems plan



The convening facilitated networking

Almost all respondents agreed that they planned to contact someone who they met at the convening in the hopes of finding a way to collaborate, including 81% who strongly agreed and 14% who agreed. One person disagreed with this statement and one person strongly disagreed.

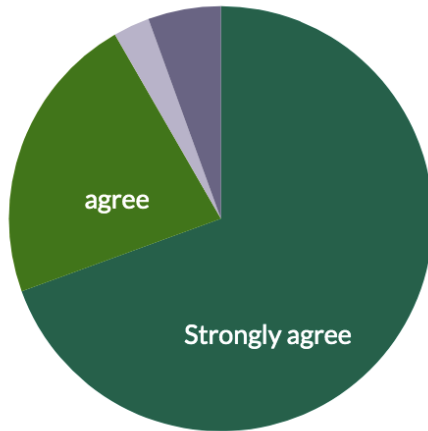
When asked how they anticipate collaborating with someone they met at the convening, most respondents indicated that they planned to share resources and strategies. Others look forward to engaging people they met as “thought partners.” As one attendee shared,

I talked with the Michigan folks about discussing our different outreach strategies for engagement with a statewide plan; Nevada and I are talking about having roles embedded in state government. I'm definitely reaching out to Colorado after to talk about their new state-based role. Not new faces, but a new initiative is that the New England folks are talking about joint action to include climate resiliency in our food planning efforts moving forward.

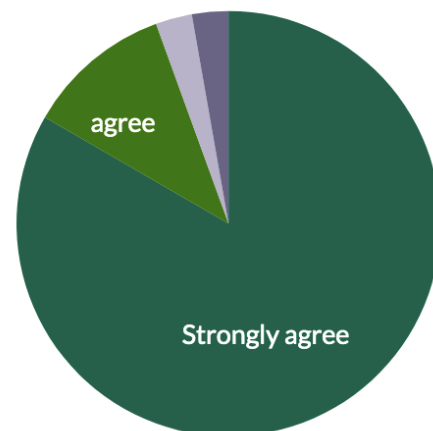
Most people found the convening valuable

For over 90% of respondents, the convening was a valuable use of their time and directly helpful to their work.

92% of respondents gained ideas about strategies useful to their work



94% of respondents found the convening a valuable use of time



Many respondents elaborated on the value of peer learning and the value of sharing challenges and strategies with other people engaged in similar issues. One respondent shared how this convening provided a time and space to step back and gain perspective:

To have the solidarity of so many others working on similar projects, going through similar struggles, and so many examples of different kinds of successes and triumphs are extremely valuable. Our time together was precious because we rarely have time in our own spheres to step back and away and gain some perspective. This meeting allowed us to do that and, for me, this will be highly influential in our process.

Two survey respondents did not find the convening a valuable use of their time. While one did not offer further comment, the other person explained,

I thought the conversations were very polarizing at times and reminded me that the left is often as unwilling to stretch across the aisle as the right....I was very dismayed by the fact that though the conversation was so focused on diversity, it was a specific type of diversity. In other words, most individuals seemed ok to make decisions about who was included in the conversation.

Participants praised the facilitation and structure of the convening

Although there were no survey questions that asked participants to reflect specifically on the facilitation and design of the convening, many participants mentioned it in open-ended sections of the survey. Repeated themes discussed the effective structure of having “conversation catalysts,” having ample time to network and “deeply connect” with each other, and the balance of plenaries and breakouts. One respondent said that it was a “great model for how a convening should go” and another specified that the agenda was “well-conceived.” Another respondent wrote,

[This was] one of the best gatherings I have attended in terms of design. I felt like the conversations were honest and transparent, people were deeply engaged and not running off to make calls, leaving sessions or distracted by gadgets. The participants were an amazing group of people, facilitators were very effective and skillful, food was delicious, what else is there to say?

Many appreciated the convening’s focus on equity

For many (9, 25%) respondents, one of the biggest takeaways from the convening related to themes of racial equity and justice. At the opening of the first day of the convening, each of the conference organizers explicitly discussed issues of race and equity, acknowledging that these issues relate both to the convening itself, as well as to attendees’ respective food systems plan work. In her opening remarks, one committee member addressed participants by saying, “Many people who facilitate food system plans are white. We invite you to observe who is in the room, and who is not in the room.” Shortly after, guest speaker Malik Yakini addressed the group, speaking about how the people who are most negatively impacted by our food system need to be leading the work -- not just an afterthought -- and how this principle needs to be in the center of our thinking.

The evaluation survey did not have questions that asked specifically about equity, but participants referred to it in their open-ended responses related to the most valuable parts of the convening and how they plan to use something they learned in their work. Some shared an appreciation for how the convening explicitly incorporated these themes throughout the gathering, and others shared ways that they intend to frame their work going forward. In their own words, attendees shared:

I will be bringing new ideas about how to do policy back to my Policy Committee. I will be framing our work in terms of equity and climate in a more consistent, explicit way, among other things.

[I gained] additional encouragement to be bolder in centering justice in our work.

Specific framing around equity presented at this event will be useful in better addressing it in our resources and opinion pieces going forward.

[I] will explore additional ways to weave racial equity and justice into our work more intentionally.

I would really like to learn the challenges of planning and implementing a racially equitable food system plan in other regions of the country where the work has not begun.

[I found it valuable to] lead with racial equity in a way that focused on how we practice it, not just why it matters.

Centering discussions on equity and systemic issues in food and ag systems was very valuable.

Attendees found the convening energizing

Several attendees also shared in open-ended responses how the convening gave them renewed inspiration and the energy to take on new challenges. Others used the words “reinvigoration,” “boldness” and “renewed motivation.” As one person put it,

I learned SO MUCH. I met so many amazing people. I also often feel a little alone in my work, sandwiched into a big bureaucracy where I am the only cross-cutting/systems employee and always fighting for the work and for continued support, but without likeminded colleagues to bounce ideas off of. Even just the face time with others doing this work (in so many different ways and forms) powered my batteries back up.

Looking ahead

Participants were asked an open-ended question about the ways they would like to communicate, collaborate, and reconnect with each other after the convening. Seven respondents left this blank, and another 4 were “not sure.”

Several respondents referred to how the small group that formed at the convening related to “2.0 plans” already has intention to keep in touch via video and conference calls. Other respondents would like to see another national convening of food system plans, either annually or every two years. In lieu of another stand-alone gathering, one way to keep the momentum going may be to host a gathering that is affiliated with the November 2020 National Food Policy Meeting hosted by Johns Hopkins. In their own words, participants wrote:

Regarding the group that was covered here in Detroit, I think coming back together in 2 years would be amazing to see how we have all progressed.

Further communities of practice, around racial equity, climate, plan development, etc. would be extremely helpful.

Several respondents suggested creating communities of practice around specific issues, and hosting zoom calls to communicate. Two people suggested making a stronger connection with existing groups such as INFAS, the Inter-institutional Network for Food, Agriculture and Sustainability or FSLN, the Food Systems Leadership Network.

Two other respondents were thankful for the directory of the national convening participants, indicating that they preferred to follow-up with other attendees on their own.