

Giving Youth a Seat at the Food Policy Table

Jess Halliday

Founded in 2009, the Toronto Youth Food Policy Council (TYFPC) was the world's first entity dedicated to ensuring 16 to 30-year olds have a voice in food issues. Melana Roberts, Chair from 2014 to 2019, spoke to Jess Halliday about the importance of the youth perspective and diversity, and how TYFPC members are helping to bring the model to other cities.

What exactly is the Toronto Youth Food Policy Council, and what does it do?

“The Toronto Youth Food Policy Council is a grass-roots organisation, although we report to the Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) at their meetings. We have our own mandate and structure, with a chair or co-chairs, a vice chair, an executive, a fund-raising arm and three committees: the

education committee, the advocacy committee and the networking committee. The 16 council members are students and young professionals between the ages of 16 and 30. We conduct an application process annually for open roles on the council, and members usually serve three terms.

“Our role has evolved over time. Today it is best encapsulated as working to engage, inform and mobilise young people around food and food policy issues. There is a two-pronged approach to realise that goal.

“One part is creating platforms and opportunities for young people to have a seat and space at policy tables themselves, and to share their experiences and perspectives on the many challenges we are facing in our food system.

“The other part is helping young people to integrate into the wider food network locally and regionally, to build networks and relationships. It is a way for them to identify career pathways, to experience leadership opportunities, and to hone their skills.”



Melana Roberts at the premiere screening of the film, *10 Billion: What Will We Eat Tomorrow?*

Can you explain the interface with the TFPC and the benefits of the relationship?

“Today, we have two seats on the TFPC. Usually the TYFPC co-chairs or the chair and vice chair hold those seats. Also, for the last couple of years there has been a paid liaison position between the TYFPC and the TFPC, so we have been able to work very closely with the TFPC and Toronto Public Health to move different issues forward.

“The benefit for the TFPC is that youth have a very distinctive and different perspective – whether you are thinking about the average farmer being over 50, or young people being extremely concerned about climate change, or a whole generation of people who are very interested, engaged and committed to understanding where their food is coming from — young people see things differently. We are building on the shoulders of food leaders who have come before us, and by having young peoples’ voices at that table we are shaping a more diverse, just and sustainable view of what the future can look like in Canada.

“Through the liaison position we have overseen the social media for the TFPC, and that has been a key engagement space to cultivate conversations and bring a whole generation of people into these issues. There has also been a real shift in how things are done, like interactive maps for food planning and increased technological inputs to better use and understand information.”

What are some of the recent achievements of the TYFPC?

“One of our biggest achievements is that 10 years later we’re still around and more engaged than ever! We started out as an entirely unfunded group but in recent years we have been successful in securing a number of large grants from local actors to undertake our own work.

“We were the only youth-led organisation invited to the government-led civil society national food policy consultation in Canada that was launched in 2017, and have

been very engaged in that process.

“We are also regularly asked to play an informing role, ranging from providing feedback to the City on how they should provide grants to unincorporated grass-roots groups, to being the only youth-led group in the City of Toronto to participate in government’s dialogue on the first regional food strategy. I have also been asked to speak on food policy issues and youth engagement in universities, at events and in the media.

“Some huge accomplishments are not even about us. In Berlin they are working on developing a Youth Food Policy Council, modelled after our work, and recently some government officials visiting from South Korea were also thinking institutionalising a similar model in their government system. We have had conversations with actors from Slovenia, Japan and from other cities in Canada, like Vancouver and Montreal, who are interested in establishing a youth arm. We are a model that people see a lot of value in.”

How do you ensure that the TYFPC is inclusive, that young people from all social groups and minorities have a voice or are represented?

“This past year has been the most diverse council we have ever had. We post the jobs in spaces where diverse youth – geographically, ethnically, culturally – are going to see them. We really draw on local community actors. We do our best to prioritise groups that have been historically excluded from food conversations; in Canada this means Indigenous Peoples, racialised communities, immigrants and people living on a low income.

“Every year we receive applications from upwards of 50 people, so it is very competitive. The selection process is merit-based but we don’t limit someone’s ability to apply if they haven’t completed a university degree or don’t have a high school diploma. We often receive applications from people with high qualifications, who have trained as doctors or nurses for example, and yet we select other applicants over them because we see an opportunity to create innovative food leaders.

“I am also very proud that for the last five years we have had an anti-oppression policy that ensures we are an inclusive, diverse and equitable space for young people. The policy covers matters like the kind of spaces we hold our meetings in so as to ensure they are accessible, and providing a nutritious, culturally-informed meal at every one of our meetings. By ensuring our spaces meet these basic criteria we are doing our part to make food-systems issues accessible to all.”

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More info

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