From coalitions to social movements: Lessons from civic food coalition formation in Australia

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Abstract

Despite the abundant literature on the need for grassroots food system reform, the process for achieving such reform is less understood from the perspective of multi-scalar coalition building. Using semi-structured interviews with civic food coalition leaders in Australia, our paper examines the strengths and struggles associated with collectivising, collaborating, and planning that civic food coalitions experience as they aim to drive wider transformations in food systems. Findings indicate a need to pay heightened attention during the early stages of coalition formation, as this is when coalitions form a sustainable structure as they begin to scale up. In addition to gaining a better understanding of these internal dynamics, we argue that civic food coalitions can be one pathway to transform the food system, as they serve as an important catalyst to bring food-related issues (such as social and environmental justice) to the forefront in building alliances and collective action across communities.

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Introduction

Coalitions are a necessary contribution to any social movement for systemic change (McCammon and Van Dyke, 2010), including urgent efforts to progress towards more sustainable, healthy and equitable food systems (Blay-Palmer et al., 2016; Moragues-Faus, 2017; FAO, 2020). Through this lens, transformation is understood as the ability to shift from existing and dominant systems onto new and innovative pathways (Folke et al., 2010), emphasising how change occurs. Coalitions emerge when distinct activist groups mutually agree to work together towards a shared goal, in recognition that change requires expanding the power of individuals, organisations, networks and alliances through collective action (McCammon and Van Dyke, 2010; Shawki and Schnyder, 2021). Specifically, civic food coalitions are said to (a) involve a range of civic food actors, practices, innovations, and discourses working together (Pereira et al., 2020; Schiff and Levkoe, 2014), and thus (b) can facilitate greater civic engagement, transparency and participation in food politics (MacRae and Donahue, 2013). They are also often situated at the nexus of environmental, social and economic justice efforts, as local communities increasingly recognise (and mobilise around) food-related policy agendas connecting access to healthy food with reducing CO2 emissions, addressing food waste, and respecting ecological boundaries (Canal Viera et al., 2019; Mattioni, 2021). In this sense, coalition building is an important element within wider social/environmental movement mobilisation, as it provides opportunities to maximise the power of collective joint action at different scales (Diani and McAdam, 2003). In Australia, a growing number of civic food coalitions, initiatives, networks, alliances and broader social movement actors (that together constitute 'civic food networks', or CFNs) are rapidly organising in order to find new pathways away from the dominant industrial agri-food system (Canal Vieira et al., 2019; Smith, 2023). While arguments to change the current industrialised food system have been widely studied, the challenges and opportunities associated with expanding civic food coalitions – as a key pathway to mobilising such change – have not been extensively reviewed.

Through qualitative research with leaders of selected Australian food coalitions, we explore these dynamics by examining the conditions and processes that enable civic food coalitions to scale up their transformative potential, or on the contrary that impede their efforts to do so. Specifically, we ask: *What conditions and/or processes occur when civic food coalitions form and develop? What strategies have Australian food coalitions followed as they aim to scale up their impact and produce change? What is the connection between coalition building and growing a wider food movement?*

We argue that experiences at the stage of coalition formation – such as establishing a formally-agreed governance structure, assigning leadership roles, and defining clear goals – determine the level of success coalitions achieve in enhancing the power of individuals and groups through collective action. This provides a better understanding of how political, economic and social dynamics challenge complex food systems (Marsden and Morley, 2014), and complements research that grounds understandings of strategic scaling-up in the experiences of food movement leaders (see Hoey and Sponseller, 2018; Shawki and Hunter, 2022). It also contributes to the growing body of research that explores the transformative capacity of CFNs for sustainability more generally (Lohest et al., 2019; Zoll et al., 2021).

Our paper is structured as follows. We start with a review of the literature on Australian food coalitions, as well as that which highlights the central role of coalitions in catalysing collective action across multiple scales. We then turn to Community Coalition Action Theory (CCAT, from the field of community development), as a theoretical framework to better understand how community place-based coalitions are formed, maintained and institutionalised, thus linking coalitions with the conditions required for effecting wider social change. Next, we describe the methodology based on interview research with leaders of civic food coalitions in Australia. This draws on a subset of qualitative data from a nation-wide participatory study of civil society, food justice and sustainability transformations in Australia, entitled Fair Food Futures. Findings are organised along three themes related to the formation of place-based civic food activism through coalitions: (a) operations and processes, (b) leadership and staffing, and (c) formalising structures. In line with our overall aim to

understand the conditions, processes and strategies associated with scaling up, these findings demonstrate that strong foundations are essential in the early stages of coalition formation, as this is where group cohesion, shared purpose and functionality are established and sustained. From this, the stability for alliance-building can grow, and movements are more likely to strengthen over time. The paper concludes with reflection on the conditions required to support civic food coalitions in implementing solutions to food system inequalities, thus reinforcing the importance of shared values and representation. This focus reflects international interest in environmental and social movement politics and contributes to the emerging body of Australian research investigating civic coalitions' potential to create transition pathways towards more sustainable and inclusive food systems.

Food politics in Australia

In Australia, there is growing interest in diverse CFNs that support locally grown produce, community-supported agriculture, animal rights and welfare, urban agroecology, sustainable diets, and food literacy. This movement has grown geographically and politically in the last two decades, largely due to concerns heightened by the 2008 global financial crisis (which raised the cost of basic foods), increased concentration of major food retailers, and the aftermath of floods and droughts that periodically affect food supply chains, leading to rising domestic food insecurity (Burton et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2016). Additionally, the sustainability of food systems faces many challenges on matters such as soil degradation, depletion of land and water resources, and loss of biodiversity (HLPE, 2019). These problems have emphasised a growing need to revive urban food production and promote community support for an alternative food system in Australia and elsewhere (Larder et al., 2014; Lyons et al., 2013; Thornton, 2017). Covid-19 has further entrenched CFNs as important contributors to building more resilient and just food systems (Nemes et al., 2021), in line with the wider literature calling for increased support for local level, civil society initiatives (Mattioni, 2021). The formation of civic food coalitions has been an important (yet under-researched) topic, which our paper specifically aims to address.

The Australian food movement consists of a variety of networks and alliances across public and civic sectors. The number of CFNs in Australia is increasing, and although there is currently no national database that counts them, estimates range from around 500 'fair food' initiatives nationally (Smith, 2019), to 400+ individual initiatives in Sydney alone (Williams and Tait, 2023). When organised into national-level coalitions – such as the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance (AFSA), Right to Food Coalition, New Economies Network Australia (NENA), Open Food Network, Young Farmers' Connect, Sustainable Table, and SUSTAIN – they increasingly play a recognisable role in the food advocacy space, with growing presence in the Australian political landscape. While their motivations, visions and goals differ, as do their operational scale and outcomes, they generally align around action-focused agendas to: (i) localise food production and consumption (mainly through the growth of urban agriculture and consumer education); (ii) shift towards more ecologically sustainable and resilient farming models (such as agroecology or regenerative agriculture); (iii) build cooperative food distribution and financing models; (iv) address food access, affordability and health outcomes; and (v) enhance sociocultural inclusion and rights (through food justice, food sovereignty or right to food discourses) (Smith, 2023). As is often the case in other places (such as Canada – see example in Sumner, 2018), Australian CFNs can increasingly be found operating in alliance with groups working across the climate, health and nutrition, energy, peace and education spheres.

Coalitions thus have an important function in developing policies for sustainable and just food systems, despite their limited formal influence over food governance in Australia to date (Carey et al., 2015; Carrad et al. 2022; Parker and Morgan, 2013). For instance, civil society coalitions played an important role in critiquing the development of the 2013 'National Food Plan' in Australia and the subsequent development of the 'People's Food Plan' (Sippel and Larder, 2019). The latter document was based on substantial grassroots consultation, providing a mostly cohesive (although contested) guiding 'vision' around which the Australian food movement could mobilise, it is currently being updated through similar participatory methods (AFSA, 2022). This affirmed

coalition building as an important strategy to challenge the dominant market-driven policy underpinning the government plan, solidified the AFSA as a key policy actor, and demonstrated the capacity for collective political action (Caraher et al., 2013). Similarly, the Right to Food Coalition is very active in policy debates around the right to food (which Australia does not legislate) as a response to rising rates of food insecurity and lack of adequate public policies around food access (Wood et al., 2018). In terms of environmentalism, civic food coalitions have long been influential in advocating for 'food systems' reforms and in food-climate politics in general (Mann, 2021; Schlosberg and Craven, 2019). Recent outcomes have been the inclusion of agriculture under the Australia New Zealand Food Standards code review in 2021 and the recognition of agroecology in the UN Global Biodiversity Framework in 2022.

Although Australian civic food coalitions are growing at the grassroots level, they do not have sufficient political influence to direct a sustainable food systems agenda in government and industry sectors (Lourival and Rose, 2020). Government food policy making remains highly fragmented, with few formal processes to engage civil society in decision making within a context of over-reliance on the food relief sector, significant power asymmetries, weak domestic food policies, and means-tested welfare policies that prioritise market solutions over civic ones (Dixon and Richards, 2016). Moreover, Australian food coalitions have tended to focus on specific food system issues, such as food security, health and nutrition, food waste, education, climate change or disaster relief (Carrad et al., 2022), with less focus on addressing structural barriers and inequalities around race, gender, and social class, which are more visible in American and Canadian food movements (Smith, 2023). This makes it difficult to engage with those who are food insecure and disenfranchises certain communities from playing a more active role in food system reforms (Moragues-Faus, 2017). Other obstacles noted in the literature include limited access to land for practical food justice initiatives (such as community gardens, composting hubs, community kitchens and food exchanges), low levels of public engagement, little funding, over-regulation and over-reliance on volunteer labour (Canal Vieira et al., 2019). While some of these Australian studies have sought to document the conditions that enable or impede the scaling up of individual food initiatives, none have expanded this to consider the factors that enable (or hinder) coalitions to cooperate for a larger collective impact on food politics. We turn now to the rich literature on coalitions and social movements to further justify our study's focus on coalition building.

Coalitions in relation to social movements

A vast literature argues that civil society is a necessary component for transformability because it encourages citizens to actively organise around food-related issues, with the potential to restructure food systems (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011; Renting et al., 2012). It has also been argued that coalitions are strong drivers of transformative change, as they establish innovative platforms for diverse public and private actors to organise around solutions to social-ecological issues that are simultaneously local and transnational (Andrée et al., 2019; Diani et al., 2010). Through community-based collectivising, sharing of resources and knowledge, and expanding social networks, coalitions create spaces for food initiatives to take on more ambitious outcomes while increasing public attention and visibility for their causes (Brooker and Meyer, 2019; Tarrow, 2005). It is not always clear, however, what role coalitions play in wider movement building, (or vice-versa), which raises questions about the extent to which coalitions can provide a pathway for societal and political change.

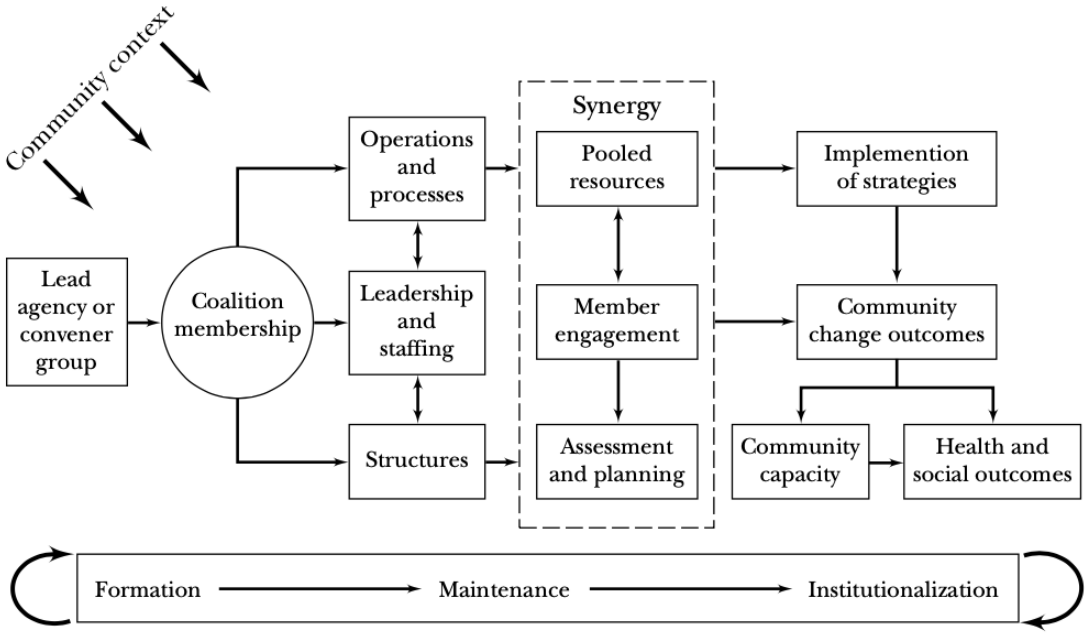
Social movements (SM) develop when people are collectively driven to create change in individual, political, and/or societal institutions and structures (Brooker and Meyer, 2019; Diani, 2003). Coalitions specifically emerge in a community when there is a need for previously- distinct individuals or groups to share, collectivise, and act upon a specific joint action (Butterfoss, 2007). The reasons for establishing coalitions can vary by cause, motivation, geography, recruitment, activities, organisational form; can be translocal and/or transnational in scale; and can be short-lived (event coalition) or longstanding (enduring coalition) (Levi and Murphy, 2006; Shawki and Schnyder, 2021). Coalitions are also seen as vital insofar as they are able to coordinate and gain mutual support for a specific action, or campaign, quicker than networks can since they are often driven by a specific target perceived as an urgent threat (Staggenborg, 2010). While the strongest example of a coalition

within agri-food studies has been the rise of La Vía Campesina and its relation to the food sovereignty movement (Martínez-Torres and Rosset, 2010; McMichael, 2008), the fact remains that the effectiveness of global movements is also tied to how well they can resonate with localised values and activities. For example, Sippel and Larder (2019) describe tensions in transferring food sovereignty from global South to settings in the global North, such as the mismatch between rural and urban constituent concerns. Smith (2018) highlights similar problems when 'zero hunger' discourse grew from a regional initiative to a global sustainability movement, including a 'watering down' of radical critiques. With limited existing research into Australian food coalitions, understanding the various stages that coalitions undergo in order to be considered significant for movement building is an area in need of additional attention.

The factors required for coalition formation have been well explored in the SM literature through the conditions that make coalitions possible. According to SM scholars, closely aligned ideologies, interests and core beliefs have been shown to be important for coalition formation, and for coordinated action to develop (McCammon and Van Dyke, 2010; Shawki and Schnyder, 2021). Success requires relations of solidarity and inclusion (Shawki and Hunter, 2022). Moreover, coalition work requires a great deal of collaboration, and core coalition members will often share some level of mutual understanding (Beamish and Luebbers, 2009). Studies thus highlight the importance of establishing safe and interactive spaces that encourage coalition actors to engage with one another despite difference or distance (Enriquez, 2014). Tattersall (2010) further proposes that a coalition's formation and potential success is best understood by three elements – a strong organisational relationship (i.e., structures such as decision-making), common concern (i.e., shared goals), and scale (i.e., power at different geographic points) – which in turn depend on its organisational strength and the choices that its actors make.

In relation to food systems, coalition research has largely focused on food policy coalitions or food councils (McCartan and Palermo, 2017; Schiff, 2007) but has not widely documented the process of building civic food coalitions. In the remainder of this paper, we seek to better understand coalition building by looking internally at the conditions and processes that occur when civic food coalitions form, and as they seek to scale up their impact and transformative potential in Australia. Specifically, we examine the experiences of Australian CFNs in coalition formation as denoted by Community Coalition Action Theory (CCAT) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Community Coalition Action Theory Framework



Source: Adapted from Butterfoss and Kegler (2002: 163)

CCAT was developed within the field of community development by Butterfoss and Kegler (2002) to provide a theoretical framework for how community place-based coalitions are formed, maintained and institutionalised. It helps to explain how coalitions may improve their outcomes (Butterfoss and Kegler, 2002) and so represents a unique approach to linking coalitions with the conditions required for affecting wider social change. The three stages of coalition development begin with: (1) formation (linking together the core purpose, structure, and internal organisational functioning of a coalition); (2) maintenance (strengthening membership and engagement, and implementing strategies to achieve the coalition's objectives); and (3) institutionalisation (engaging/reinforcing/refining strategies and expanding social capital across sectors) (Butterfoss, 2007; Butterfoss and Kegler, 2002). For this study, CCAT provides the groundwork to understand the strengths, struggles, limitations, and advantages faced during coalition formation in particular (Table 1) – as this was the stage to which most of our empirical data directly relates. This methodology is described hereunder.

Table 1: Description of formation stage constructs in CCAT

Constructs	Characteristics and Objectives
Lead agency/convener group	Is able to respond to an opportunity; can help mobilise community members to form a coalition; assists in initiating recruitment; provides technical, financial, and/or material support (e.g., a meeting space); and provides network contacts.
Coalition membership	Is the composition of a coalition's core group of members (i.e., number of sectors and individual actors); and focuses on recruiting and representing a range of interest groups, agencies, organisations, and institutions across communities.
Coalition operations and processes	Is the ability to: have open communication channels with staff and members; foster a positive work environment and organisational climate; maintain good social cohesion, and manage staff and membership conflict; review benefits and costs; ensure continual participation in assessment, planning, and resources development; share decision-making processes; and develop positive relationships amongst members and staffs.
Leadership and staffing	Is the process of: establishing strong leadership that will improve coalition functioning and purpose; pooling resources, managing member engagement; reviewing and developing plans; defining staff roles; if possible, creating paid positions for staff with organisational skills to provide support and facilitate the collaborative processes for coalition functioning. If having paid staff is not possible, roles must be clearly stated, and leadership must be able to support staff members to ensure ongoing satisfaction and commitment.
Structure	Is the ability to formalize and define roles, rules, policies, guidelines, and procedures, which will increase the likelihood of effective assessments and planning.

Source: Adapted from Butterfoss (2007: 77–81) and Butterfoss and Kegler (2002: 164–167)

Methodology

CCAT was chosen as the conceptual framework that is most adequate for this project in identifying and categorising stages of coalition building. In providing a framework to guide grassroots coalitions across these phases (Butterfoss, 2007), CCAT has historically been applied in healthcare research to evaluate community-driven coalition collaboration and to identify areas for improvement (Ghaffari et al., 2023; Luque et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2017). However, very few studies have used CCAT to analyse the challenges coalition actors face across the three stages (Eggert et al., 2015; Kegler and Swan, 2011). It has only minimally been applied to the field of agri-food research, namely in evaluating food policy councils (McCartan and Palermo, 2016; Schiff, 2007), and not at all to environmental coalitions. Our research seeks to build on this potential, by applying

CCAT for the first time to Australian CFNs.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six leaders of Australian CFNs about their experiences and involvement working with coalitions, as part of a larger national study of civil society and food justice movements in Australia. [1] This subset of interview data is of interest here because these leaders have influenced decades of coalition action across scales, and have extensive experience in forming and maintaining the handful of enduring national food coalitions that are most powerful within Australia's food movement today (such as AFSA, Right to Food Coalition, NENA, and SUSTAIN). Participants in our interviews had been involved with each of the civic coalitions listed in Table 2, as well as with numerous successful and unsuccessful efforts to establish and/or maintain lesser-known, smaller-scale coalitions. This paper zooms in on their experiences specifically relevant to coalition formation within civic food movements in Australia.

Table 2: Civic food coalitions connected with the research sample

Coalition	Background	Focus /activities
Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance (AFSA)	Formed in 2010 as a nation-wide, farmer-led civil society organisation focused on building and supporting democratic participation to create, manage, and choose their own food system. AFSA is a member of international social movement networks IPC, CSM/CFS, La Via Campesina, Slow Food, and URGENCI.	Advocates for Australian farmers rights, through policy proposals, to enable agroecology and regenerative farming practices to thrive in Australia. AFSA's mission is articulated formally in the People's Food Plan and First Peoples First strategy.
New Economy Network Australia (NENA)	Formed in 2017 as a national led network aiming to transform Australia's economic system to be ecological, fair, and just. NENA is also a member of international civic body RIPESS international.	Aims to create and sustain spaces that support knowledge sharing, peer support, and collaboration across all sectors of the economy. NENA has a set of 5 Foundational Principles to guide their work.
Right to Food Coalition	Formed in 2016 as a voluntary, nation-wide advocacy group made up of practitioners, health and community workers, and researchers focused on establishing and guaranteeing a right to food in Australia.	Advocates for public health policies that address food security, health and wellbeing, as well as educating the public on food-insecurity issues within Australia. Their mission was communicated formally in a 2016 position statement on the right to food.
SUSTAIN	Formed in 2009 as a national network focused on creating a sustainable and healthy food system, which was formally known as the Food Alliance (2009-2014).	Advocates for a food systems approach through policy initiatives, network building, and research.

Adapted from coalition websites: https://afsa.org.au; https://www.neweconomy.org.au; https://righttofood.org.au; https://sustain.org.au

Participants spoke to us in their individual capacity (not as spokespersons for specific coalitions), and were located in Brisbane (Turrbal and Jaggera Nations), Sydney (Gadigal of the Eora Nation), Melbourne (Wurundjeri and Bunurong Nations) and regional Victoria (Dja Dja Wurrung Nation) and New South Wales (Ngarigo Nation). Interviews were conducted between January and May 2020, interview lengths varied between 45 and 65 minutes, and all participants gave their informed consent. It is important to mention that as actors in the Australian food movement are well connected with one another, we have de-identified all names, sites

[1] Conducted from 2019-2023, this national study – Fair Food Futures - aimed to examine the visions, strengths and limitations of CFNs as they sought to address food access and sustainability, and to identify the factors shaping, enabling or constraining food system governance. In total, the study included over 120 civic food actors in interviews (n=45), case studies (n=4) and participatory workshops (6 events, 90 participants), drawn widely from grower organisations, alternative distributors, consumer cooperatives, health and education advocacy, social enterprises, food charities, academia, local government, and policy making across the country. This mixed methods approach enabled the co-construction of qualitative 'future scenarios' whereby civic food actors defined their own visions for more sustainable and just food governance, with the aim of making the values and practices of food justice more visible to policy making around food security and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. As not all of the project participants were specifically involved in coalition formation, this paper reports on a subset of findings only, based on interview data from the 6 participants with specific expertise on the topic of coalition building and transformative pathways. This yielded over 200 pages of qualitative data analysed here.

or institutions to maintain participant confidentiality (Flick, 2007). Although most of the interviews were conducted before the onset of Covid-19, the pandemic unfortunately prevented some key actors (who have also contributed to the development of Australia's food movement) from being interviewed. The final sample (n=6) is therefore not representative of all the coalitions or coalition leaders active in the Australian civic food space today. Despite the small sample size, the in-depth nature of the case study provides important new insights into both coalition building and scaling-up, and has generated a large amount of quality data with which to answer the questions set out within the scope of this paper.

The three stages in CCAT informed both the interview guide and the data analysis (Figure 1). Open-ended interview questions were divided into the three topics, in addition to asking about respondents' personal histories of food activism and advocacy (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Following Flick (2007), data were analysed thematically with open coding conducted using NVivo software, version 12. Codes were organised into major themes which were then reorganised according to CCAT stages of development. The resulting analysis revealed findings that most strongly aligned with the formation stage in CCAT (refer Table 1). In the next section, data excerpts from selected interviews are presented where they best demonstrate instances of agrement and/or divergence of coalition actors' experiences in coalition formation.

Findings

Findings from our study highlight the need to pay close attention during the early stages of coalition formation, as this is where a coalition's unity is established, which can in turn determine the likelihood of success when transitioning into later stages (Butterfoss and Kegler, 2002). They also reveal significant barriers to coalition development that predominately occur during the formation stage, and which the CFN leaders told us about. We found that effective coalition building tended to be dependent on (a) processes that support member cohesion, collaboration and trust, (b) leadership and staffing, and (c) structures that foster synergies and support shared missions and values. This supports our argument regarding the pivotal role of these elements in shaping the 'strategic capacity' of coalitions to build collective strength, as they do in other countries (Hoey and Sponseller, 2018; Shawki and Schnyder, 2021). These elements are also crucial for understanding the potential of coalitions in Australia to foster scalable food movements.

Coalition operations and processes

According to CCAT, operations and processes determine how a coalition conducts its daily activities. This includes decision-making, communicating, networking, and conflict management. Here, our participants identified tensions around establishing and maintaining member cohesion, which resulted in weaker unity, conflicts between members, and poor management and accountability over tasks. This was expressed at times with surprise, as in the following comment: 'We [the organisers] had no idea that some people would really get angry and jealous that they weren't in charge or something' [Interview 3]. Participants also acknowledged the issue of 'big personalities' or 'big egos'[Interview 5]. Others described how tensions arose because of certain members taking undue recognition for the collective work of other coalition actors. Such testimonies were consistent with the literature showing that positive internal relations are dependent on cohesion and trust between members (Butterfoss, 2007; Meyer and Corrigall-Brown, 2005).

As CCAT predicts, collaboration amongst coalition members requires a delicate balance. Even though coalition members have collectivised to accomplish specific goals, members may hold different ideological opinions and expect different political outcomes that can weaken synergy (Butterfoss, 2007). For example, participants described difficulties engaging with actors outside of the food movement, such as those in health, environment, and government sectors. While on the one hand this was largely due to multiple voices competing for recognition (and funding), it was also acknowledged that a lack of pre-existing relations with stakeholders outside of coalition communities made it harder for newly formed coalitions to partner quickly. As one interviewee explained: 'It's actually quite difficult to suddenly create them, if you like, without the trust

that's already been building up between those groups' [Interview 1]. Establishing trust is therefore a critical factor in determining if a coalition can sustain and manage conflict (Arnold, 2011). While shared ideology can assist with this, it is possible that these problems are also partly related to the degree to which actors were invested (Guenther, 2010; Levi and Murphy, 2006).

CCAT proposes that a coalition's internal processes depend on members' engagement with the mission and with one another. When membership was defined by a broad shared interest in recognising social, environmental and economic concerns within food systems, this led to more rapid expansion of the coalition. However, tensions between members holding differing ideological positions also potentially reduced the quality of collaboration and hindered the direction of the coalition's main goal, as McCammon and Moon also found (2015). Processes can be fractured by the inability to 'work together', which was a recurring theme amongst participants. This was captured in the statement, '[W]e're not always working together for the bigger picture goals as effectively as we might' [Interview 1]. This is problematic because, while informal and loosely structured coalitions can work, they can also foster weak collective and/or overlapping identities and interests, resulting in weaker collaboration (Guenther, 2010).

Although geographical distance does not necessarily result in lower rates of collaboration, it is also true that coalition formation requires space (physical or virtual) to sustain open dialogue and minimise internal conflict (Enriquez, 2014). The size of Australia and its 'tyranny of distance' [Interview 4] was widely viewed as a challenge for recruiting members, connecting and networking. Distance affected both urban and rural members, making communication channels difficult when people needed to meet, collaborate, and plan [Interview 2]. As participants noted, distance caused most conflict when coalitions needed to decide quickly on organisational issues, as physical separation hampered the desired participatory democratic approach to decision-making. In this context, forming and maintaining coalitions is constantly challenged by the need to collaborate across diverse actors and interests, who may also be separated geographically and ideologically from the spaces in which coalitions are initially emerging (Daphi et al., 2022; Gawerc, 2019). This provides some insight into why learning to operate across scales – as coalitions must – is an important starting point for successful trans-scalar movement building later on.

Leadership and staffing

Defined staffing positions and strong coalition leadership are crucial for facilitating activities aimed at pooling resources, maintaining or increasing member engagement, and developing effective plans and strategies (Schroering and Staggenborg, 2022). In our study, many participants acknowledged problems with over-reliance on volunteers and difficulties with staff having to manage multiple tasks with limited resources. Most participants expressed concern about retaining commitment and engagement, stressing how frequently members were overworked and underrepresented. One participant voiced this concern by saying, 'it's really difficult for an organisation where you don't have paid employees to be able to dedicate the amount of time that you need to work on more than one issue at a time' [Interview 2]. Another participant repeated this, while voicing the need for paid staff or a coordinator to 'try to help keep things in line' [Interview 4] (although they did not achieve this). Most coalitions reviewed here did not pay their staff and relied on the voluntary labour and professional skills of their members. Additionally, relying on volunteers without defined roles was a consistent problem, especially for coalitions with limited funding resources. This prompted comments such as, 'because we're an entirely volunteer-run organisation, just having the human resources to do [work] in every state is really hard' [Interview 5].

Clear and supported leadership roles can assist in participant recruitment, mobilising resources, transferring skills (through continuity of learning from past experiences), and addressing internal conflicts, especially if a coalition is represented by a diverse network of actors (Vélez-Vélez, 2015). Once leadership was established, however, the direction of the coalition began to achieve clarity, and 'created that shift in the way that the organisation operates and what our aims and activities are today' [Interview 5]. A few coalition actors noted

that once they could establish a clear strategic planning process, they were able to initiate more targeted action plans and build stronger dialogues with key stakeholders, demonstrating their ability to have an active presence. This has been central to the growth of the Australian CFNs examined here. As one interviewee noted, 'It's about focusing on an issue and reframing that issue' [Interview 1], which many Australian coalitions are currently doing around food justice, health and nutrition, climate change and localising supply chains. As a result, some participants observed that change was already unfolding, in that 'the public interest and uptake of food sovereign systems has been speeding up' [Interview 5]. In sum, our findings add greater clarity as to how coalitions' staffing arrangements can increase a coalitions' potential for success, as well-supported leaders are better able to refocus coalition actors' attention (and energy) back to their intended initiatives (Lauby, 2021). The general lack of funding available to support the staff and activities of civic food coalitions in Australia is therefore a major limitation to building more cohesive collective action.

Formalising coalition structures

In CCAT, structure refers to how a coalition is organised, such as through committees or working groups, and by defining roles, writing mandates and setting operational tasks. This is also the period when coalitions define their mission statements and foster collaborative synergies (Butterfoss and Kegler, 2002). Participants in this study generally agreed that developing a coalition structure is a messy and vulnerable process, forcing some groups to rebuild themselves or causing them to fall apart altogether. Despite members coming together under the premise of food system reform, a lack of a clearly defined purpose, values and mission statement caused significant pressure when trying to collectivise and meet targets. For coalitions with weak structures and little diversity, broadening their network proved challenging. For example, one participant said, 'It's always hard getting beyond your website [and] social media because what we found is that you end up just within your own little echo chamber' [Interview 2].

Participants primarily raised concerns about shared purpose and goals if coalitions formed quickly. The most consistent comment was that the initial vision and mission of the coalition was unclear, poorly defined, misrepresented, and/or too inclusive. As one participant pointed out, 'everybody comes with a different vision of what it should be' [Interview 4]. Others elaborated on how the 'image' of their coalition was not diverse or inclusive enough, with remarks such as, 'In its early years, for some people, it just seemed like a ranty, academic, activist organisation' [Interview 5], or, 'It's really hard to bridge [people together, because it] has always been in danger of appearing to be quite sort of artisanal, middle class, like the organic movement' [Interview 2]. These comments draw attention to the limitations of representation affecting civic food coalitions and movements more generally (Mann, 2019; Moragues-Faus, 2017).

Achieving a coalition mission statement took time. A few participants discussed taking two to four years before having a clearly defined and unified group. Even when a mission statement was established, membership engagement became a struggle, as one participant explained, '[Nobody] is accountable to anybody else because we're like a coalition, you get people saying yes to projects, but on behalf of everybody else' [Interview 4]. By contrast, there were some positive learnings emerging around internal governance structures and operation guidelines. Their experiences helped to shape and initiate coalition structures by focusing on core values and building the group 'as a decision tree' [Interview 3] to manage potential tensions and conflicts. These long time frames experienced by coalitions are however often at odds with the quicker pace of government or industry policy submission processes once they become open to the public.

Finally, despite many challenges experienced by coalition actors, most of our participants agreed that grassroots coalitions had the power to initiate deep, structural changes in the food system. As one leader explained, 'building the networks that we've built successfully and unsuccessfully, is this idea that if you've got a question and you run a process that brings lots of other people together, if you do that well, you will find answers [Interview 3]. How to get there, however, was more contentious. For some, 'It's got to be those more grounded networks, away from the politics' [Interview 6]. By contrast, others felt that engaging with

politics was necessary if coalitions were going to scale up from local initiatives and address systemic issues in the food system. In sum, this study's findings illustrate that specific conditions must be established within coalitions (e.g., defined purpose, governance structures and roles) before coalition members can implement more comprehensive and tailored action plans directed at other levels.

Discussion: From coalitions to social movements

The objective of our paper was to examine the dynamics that occur when civic food coalitions form and attempt to transform the food system. We did so by documenting the experiences of CFN leaders in Australia, thus building on previous studies that have positioned coalitions as crucial to the creation of movements (Brooker and Meyer, 2019; Diani, 2003; McCammon and Van Dyke, 2010; Shawki and Schnyder, 2021). Our findings described above highlight the importance of the formation stage for ensuring coalition stability, a key requirement for coalitions to progress to the stages of maintenance and institutionalisation (and thus impact).

Determining the stability of a coalition in the Australian context appears to be primarily contingent on formalising its purpose, key structures, and roles. Coalitions that did not do so faced a variety of struggles, including higher propensity for member conflict, lowered capability to manage external resources, poor organisational culture, weak staff and member management, less committed members and lower member satisfaction, weaker collaboration and participation processes, diminished trust amongst members and partners, and ineffective implementation of action plans. These day-to-day stresses compounded leaders' concerns about the strategic capacity of coalitions to scale up; a problem common to other countries as well (see Hoey and Sponseller, 2018). Barriers such as these do not stop coalitions from forming or functioning, but they do make it harder to achieve their goals, and so delay and/or disrupt the process that enables scaling up to be effective (McCammon and Moon, 2015). We therefore add that a food coalition's capacity to 'scale up', if it so chooses, depends not only on coalition actors' ability to attain (and influence) a targeted outcome (such as a specific food policy change), but to also sustain relations between actors who may address food politics from different angles and from different networks (i.e., health networks working with food/climate networks). However, this requires an understanding by coalition actors as to why establishing strong foundations is vitally important during coalition formation.

Our findings also speak to the question of how SM mobilisation might be contributing to the transformation of the current food system. First, we think that a strength of Australian food coalitions is that they are not necessarily responding to a larger transnational food movement, but are instead dealing with real-life community issues and finding solutions to meet those needs (Diani et al., 2010). In North America, for example, the steep rise in the number of food policy councils and food coalitions is a direct response to the lack of government bodies able to address food-related issues (McCartan and Palermo, 2017). This has forced civic groups to take action and 'fill in' for the government – a situation also reflected by interviewees in this study in Australia. On the one hand, this locates coalitions in a particular social-political position and situates them in specific community locales (Born and Purcell, 2006; Teixeira and Motta, 2022). Shared problem definitions and ideologies that resonate locally are thus crucial for the formation of coalitions, as this is what initially unites coalition volunteers and helps them to manage the inevitable challenges they face (Johnson and Andrée, 2019; Di Gregorio, 2012). Like Hoey and Sponseller (2018), we found that disagreements over substantive goals within coalitions had sometimes been a barrier to building inclusive strategies for collective action, despite motivations based on the shared belief that the current system needed to change (Enriquez, 2014). Unfortunately, having broad ideational goals could also mean a loosely formed vision, which was not always conducive to establishing a clear coalition identity. This stalled the process for effective action across scales. The experiences of our participants confirmed that, while shared ideology can help coalitions to form, it may not be sufficient to rely on as the only factor to sustain coalitions, especially those focused on addressing ongoing systemic problems (like hunger or ecological degradation) in their local communities (Haydu 2012; McCammon and Moon, 2015; Van Dyke and Amos, 2017). This is particularly relevant considering the recent emphasis by coalitions such as AFSA and NENA on establishing wide-ranging national frameworks, statements

or policy 'pathways'.

Second, if SMs are viewed as a collection of networks sharing a unified collective identity, and coalitions are seen as 'networks in action' (Fox, 2010), this implies the need for high levels of inclusion and collaboration (Beamish and Luebbers, 2009; Di Gregorio, 2012). However, networks will still need to address differing values, and possibly power imbalances, which might prevent different sectors and civic actors from effectively collaborating (Moragues-Faus, 2017). There are some challenges with this, as the findings here reveal. Even though networks can coordinate and agree on joint action, the work is often (if not always) implemented by coalitions. This points to the crucial role of coalitions in the actual practice of collective action, and as catalysts for more active food citizenship (Renting et al., 2012; Schroering and Staggenborg, 2022). While our findings support this, ensuring broad and inclusive representation can be problematic. We found that coalitions' potential to instigate more inclusive forms of participation can be limited by person-to-person conflict and loosely defined organisational structure. This was captured by participants who discussed the extensive difficulties that arose around decision making, which later affected coalitions' abilities to broaden outwards. Thus, the structure of a coalition appears to influence stability more than do the size and broad representation of the group (Kegler and Swan, 2011; Van Dyke and Amos, 2017). Findings from this study suggest that it might be better to aim for broader representation and diverse membership once coalitions are established and stable. Given that the Australian food movement has struggled to address structural barriers and inequities for those who are most food insecure, it will require additional leadership efforts to encourage opportunities for a wider array of actors and groups to work together. If the Australian food movement is to build and sustain itself through its CFNs, it will also need to support the growth and stability of civic food coalitions that are explicitly focused on action.

Conclusion

Studying coalitions has provided valuable insights into how civic actors are actively responding to and creating opportunities to transform the food system. In this paper, by focusing on the experiences of Australian civic food coalition leaders, we have sought to build on existing studies of CFNs and their potential to create transformative pathways. Within the literature, coalitions have been widely suggested to be a necessary feature for transformative food systems to grow; they can become the catalyst for multi-scalar action, which in turn leads to the discovery of new pathways to address current social-ecological issues.

This research has demonstrated that forming civic food coalitions is one of many important pathways for civic actors to influence food politics. This is because coalitions can provide opportunities to widen civic participation and strengthen collaborative processes between individual actors, CFNs, and local communities. This can subsequently increase the density of social networks over time and across scales, and, in turn, build movements that address issues which may be both translocal and transnational in scope. We have argued that strong foundations are however needed in the early stages of coalition formation, because this is where group cohesion, purpose and functionality are established and sustained. Our findings show that formally organising around an agreed goal, and then establishing a shared purpose, identity, and vision, can sustain coalitions as they grow. Although the challenges to coalition building are numerous, our findings also demonstrate the potential for coalitions to affect changes that are often unobtainable by individual actors or networks on their own. This provides important clarification on the ways in which food coalitions form and operate in practice (in Australia) and sets the scene for future research to further consider the conditions required to maintain and institutionalise more impactful civic food coalitions.

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