Equity-Centered Research on Chicago Food Policy Action Council's COVID-19 Rapid Response Effort

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1. Introduction

The outset of the COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted all sectors of life as we knew it. Notably, COVID-19 led to major disruptions in the Chicagoland food supply chain.[1] This cascaded into immediate concerns such as increased hunger and extensive job insecurity.[2] To rapidly alleviate these issues, the Chicago Food Policy Action Council (CFPAC) formed their COVID-19 Food System Rapid Response Effort, which manifested through working group Zoom calls. Through this quickly formulated and action-oriented effort, CFPAC coordinated and continues to facilitate emergency food, funding, resource, and distribution assistance to those most impacted by COVID-19. Our research analyzes the qualitative impacts, benefits, and challenges of CFPAC's Rapid Response Effort associated with fostering equitable Chicago region food systems and communities.
https://www.chicagofoodpolicy.com/covid19

2. Methods

We used narrative methodology, which M.D. Lecompte describes as a "*search for meaning, patterns, regularities, and principles hidden within the rich uniqueness of these stories.*"[3] In interviews, we invited CFPAC staff members (N=5) to reflect upon their experiences through stories. We selected participants based on their pertinence to CFPAC's Rapid Response Effort. We asked about their role in the Rapid Response Effort, how working groups evolved over time, observed benefits and impacts to date, challenges encountered, how their own social identities inform their work, and their hopes for longer term impacts. All aspects of the research design were developed in collaboration with Ma'raj Sheik, CFPAC's Systems and Strategy Manager. Interviews were audio recorded with participants' permission and then transcribed. We edited each transcript into a narrative profile, which was then reviewed for accuracy by the interviewee (i.e., "member check"). Qualitative data analysis involved highlighting key quotes within profiles and recording themes within and across narratives to identify converging and diverging patterns in participant's experiences and perspectives.

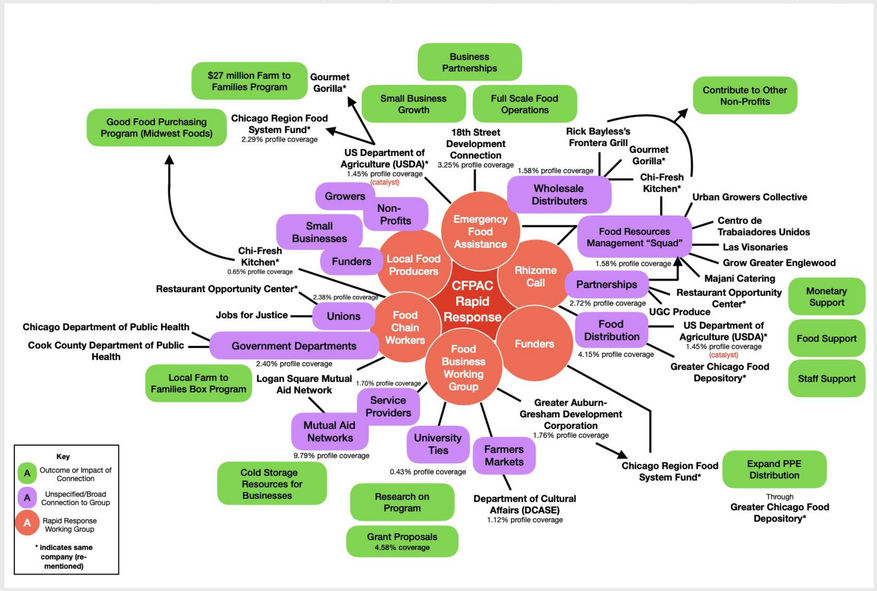
3. Results We identified 7 key themes across the narratives (Table 1). Below, we highlight results related to "Benefits and Impacts" and "Challenges."

Table 1. Parent Nodes identified through Inductive Analysis.

Parent Node	*Agreed Upon Definition*
Benefits & Impacts	Present day outcomes from the Rapid Response effort that are perceived as positive. These could be intended, unexpected, or serendipitous. Also, could be direct result of Rapid Response or a domino effect.
Challenges	Obstacles faced from anyone working with or alongside the Rapid Response effort, which can range from micro to macro issues. This also includes negative outcomes that arose as a direct or indirect byproduct and/or confronted issues of the effort.
Working Group Evolution	Changes and adaptations the working groups underwent as time and COVID progressed. This includes specific anecdotes or recollections of any shifts in the methodology of the effort, within the framework of the team, or through any related events.
Identity	The set of experiences or variables that has shaped the individual interviewee's perspective and actions, including how the staff member defines oneself through cultural affiliation, ethnicity, gender identity, etc., and how this definition shapes their work within the Rapid Response effort. Some aspects may also inform the work they do within the effort.
Hopes for Long-term Impacts	Hopes staff members desire the Rapid Response effort will have on communities and larger society post-COVID-19 pandemic.
Personally Meaningful Aspects	Important aspects of the Rapid Response effort that the interviewee noted as holding intrinsic value (i.e., meaning, purpose, and higher significance).
Staff Roles in Effort	The job and function the staff member performs within the Rapid Response effort, including transferable or soft skills, that the interviewee explained that they played in the formation and leadership of the effort.

We deepened the analysis using NVivo 12 software. Obach and Vaca individually analyzed each profile to identify parent and child nodes. Through discussion across analysts, we agreed upon a coding hierarchy that offers robust interpretation of the data *(Table 1)*.

Figure 1: Network and Outcomes of CFPAC's Rapid Response Effort Diagram. Tiers included: Working Groups (Red), Broad/Unspecified Connections (Purple), Impacts (Green). Percent profile coverage refers to times cited within interviews.



> ***"They were able to develop partnerships with folks in other organizations who could help them get direct either monetary supports, food supports, staff supports, or get directly connected to the right people that they needed to talk to."***
>
> - Rodger Cooley, Executive Director

> ***"One challenge has been, for us as an organization, to really center that phenomenon, to really center that different people on this call have different identities, they have different perspectives based on where they are within hierarchies of privilege."***
>
> - Ma'raj Sheikh, Systems & Strategy Manager

Table 2: Highlighted micro, meso, and macro-level challenges faced by Rapid Response Effort.

Organizational (Micro) Level Challenges (21.7% profile coverage)	*Governmental (Meso) Level Challenges (21.23% profile coverage)*	*Ideological (Macro) Level Challenges (38.3% profile coverage)*
Distributors unused to partnering with non-profit organizations.	Lack of organized pandemic response.	Systems of hierarchy and privilege never meant to serve the people.
Potential risk of theft of intellectual property.	Lack of social safety net; government not serving people nor providing resources.	Colorism and anti-Blackness in Chicago's Mexican community.
Cultivating an inclusive space, especially for BIPOC leaders.	Commercial farmers unable to pivot to families.	Fights over crumbs between segregated Black and Latinx communities.
Zoom burnout, dwindling participation, and inability for more in-depth in-person connections.	USDA focus on commodities rather than food access to marginalized families and communities.	Capitalism as an extractive way of managing the economy, causing varied suffering for most.
Keeping track of connections made and networks fostered.	COVID-19 compounding the need for community-driven emergency food access.	Oppressive racial dynamics through micro and macroaggressions present in working group calls.
Attracting growers to online format and figuring out the best way to attain them resources.	Ten to one gap between subsidizing and investing in white vs. non-white food-space businesses.	Non-immunity to environmental impacts; ongoing depletion of the Earth.
Scheduling constraints and creating a space valuable to prioritize.	Corporations and certain political figures taking advantage of pandemic to further their own ends.	Contextualization not just with COVID-19 but systemic power struggles through George Floyd's murder and Black Lives Matter.

4. Discussion/Conclusions

A key impact of the Rapid Response Effort was expanding existing and developing new networks, relationships, and connections (Figure 1). The 5-6 working groups often shifted in structure as they adapted to changing conditions and priorities. Myriad outcomes came about through these connections (Figure 1). Tangible impacts observed by CFPAC staff included substantive effects on various food system sectors, such as businesses, non-profits, farm to families programs, cold storage, Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) distribution, and research. General connections related to Food Distribution were mentioned most often (4.15% profile coverage); the primary goal of the Rapid Response Effort was to distribute food and/or to re-establish disrupted supply chains. Many observed impacts seemed to arise directly from the effort; however, a select few may be considered secondary effects, such as partnerships built amongst small food businesses. CFPAC's facilitation resulted in a hub of networks responding to immediate needs and working towards racial justice in the food system.

Ideological and governmental challenges pose an ongoing threat to the longevity of the Rapid Response Effort. Yet, through proven resilience and ongoing mutual aid, the Effort amends these challenge's ripple effects. Organizational challenges are comprehensive yet feasible to overcome.

Further research can investigate whether connections formed through the Effort catalyze systemic change in the Chicagoland food system.

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