

## CITY-TO-CITY COOPERATION FOR MORE DEMOCRATIC AND INCLUSIVE FOOD SYSTEMS: What has been achieved and what remains to be done

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*It is estimated that 80% of all food will be consumed in urban areas by 2050. As a result, cities are increasingly viewed as key drivers of the transition to sustainable food systems that can ensure food security and livelihoods for all while lowering emissions and safeguarding the environment. Municipal governments are indeed engaging with food policies as part of their broader sustainable development agendas and their efforts to transition to a circular economy and strengthen urban-rural interlinkages. City food networks – led by the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, which celebrated its 7th global forum in Barcelona in October – provide important frameworks for urban food action. However, they alone cannot tackle the unevenness of global urban food geography and the economic and political power structures that shape today's food systems*

**I**t has been six years since the signing of the **Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP)**, a protocol that commits municipalities to develop more sustainable urban food systems. Today, the number of signatories has more than quadrupled, reaching 217 cities that together represent the needs and interests of more than 400 million citizens. Initiatives like the MUFPP have injected much-needed optimism into the global food policy arena, creating an important space for municipal actors to connect, share knowledge and best practices and build the capacity to reshape old and inefficient food-related development pathways through the articulation of new collective visions.

Cities have also featured prominently in many of the events organised as part of this year's **UN Food System Summit**, which seeks to pave the way for global food system transformations to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Urban practices that aim to develop more joined-up food policies, enhance the participation of citizens and civil society organisations in food governance, and incentivise multi-actor collaboration are increasingly recognised as important leverage points for food system transformations.

However, the enthusiasm surrounding cities' dynamic engagement with food policy should not obfuscate the unevenness of the urban food geography that has emerged globally as a consequence of factors such as austerity cuts, a shrinking state, the tendency of food activism to be clustered around specific cities and substantial differences in the organising capacity of civil society. City food networks like MUFPP cannot counteract this unevenness alone. While global food policy partnerships can be a great enabler of the shift towards more sustainable practices, their translation into local policies will always be shaped by distinctive geographical and historical contexts and by multi-scalar socio-ecological relations. Although there is undoubtedly more cooperation today between cities on food policy, this needs to be complemented by coordinated agri-food governance across different scales of government. For example, in many countries, the actions of cities are often seriously constrained by the institutional lethargy of national governments with set mandates, historically engrained agendas and departments that work in silos.

Ignoring the diversity of urban contexts and the diverse multi-level governance arrangements in which cities operate creates the danger of reducing the urban to a discrete spatial category that exists in isolation from both macro- and micro-level political dynamics. An illustrative example of this tendency is the widespread use of concepts like "resilient" or "smart" cities, which evoke aggregated data, performance indicators and techno-managerial fixes. Standardised measurements, monitoring frameworks, metrics and indicators will not help us address the root causes of inequality, malnutrition and environmental degradation. Nor will they help us to properly understand how the urban food agenda is shaping the lived experiences and ordinary practices of millions of citizens.

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Are the initiatives taken by municipal governments to transform the food system effectively enhancing human capacities and entitlements? This question is especially relevant in the Mediterranean region and even more so in the Global South, where the urban metabolism is characterised by multiple informal flows (of people, ideas, knowledge and resources) that present major challenges to the quantification of urban food systems for evidence-based policymaking.

To be politically meaningful, the urban food agenda needs to start engaging with issues of power and its context-dependent dynamics and implications. In other words, far more efforts need to be made to understand how power structures shape and mediate the relationship between a city and

the food system. As part of this, it is important that cities – individually and collectively – find ways to push back against global agribusinesses and profit-driven multinational conglomerates, which continue to shape the urban food environment in complex ways. Cities can also contribute to addressing global food system inequalities. Hosting forthcoming MUFPP gatherings and food policy mayors’ summits in cities in less developed countries would, for example, be an important step in this direction. Increased support for and engagement with “citizen science” activities related to urban food systems could generate much-needed knowledge about the ways global power dynamics are confronted and shaped at the local level, and where hidden food practices and everyday forms of resistance continue to play an important role in feeding fast-growing urban populations.

More generally, it is time to raise some critical questions about urban food governance and the diversity of urban experiences: Who is empowered and dis-empowered by the unfolding of the urban food agenda? Whose concerns are prioritised and whose concerns are rendered invisible in our cities? Context-specific information on food supply and consumption, which is currently absent or insufficient in many cities, is vital if we are to develop progressive food policies, monitor how they translate into enhanced human well-being and ultimately understand the type of support each city needs from other scales of government.

The latter point will need particular attention in the development of the next phase of the urban food agenda. The MUFPP and other city food networks are strengthening the horizontal dimension of food governance and creating relations between local food system innovators. The long-term sustainability of these initiatives, however, will depend on more backing and support from regional, national and global governance actors.

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The transformation of urban food systems is thus an enormous challenge that city governments cannot address alone. National governments, in particular, are critical actors for mobilising knowledge and resources, legislation and regulation. They can channel attention towards research and policy agendas that look at the city not as an abstract entity, but through the eyes of citizens, capturing their lived food experiences, ordinary practices and tacit knowledge. Central governments also have the capacity to invest resources in the food system infrastructure (such as wholesale markets, food hubs and diversified distribution channels), which is vital to scaling out successful practices beyond the administrative boundaries of the city and reconnecting urban areas with their surrounding rural hinterland. Finally, national governments are ideally positioned to address the power

dynamics that insidiously shape urban food environments; for example, by re-orientating agri-food trade flows more around needs, by regulating relationships between supermarkets and their suppliers to ensure a fairer distribution of profit, and by setting de-carbonisation targets.

Researchers, practitioners, citizens and policymakers all need to learn to see the urban food system as both a process and an outcome. Its reconfiguration demands new and stronger forms of collaboration that cut across disciplinary boundaries, interest groups, constituencies and governance scales. Such concerted effort is a vital step towards the development of long-term, evidence-based and inclusive strategies that can make urban food policies cohesive enough to sustain a structural transformation of the food system.