



So we need to work on food... but where should we start?



London, Belo Horizonte, Detroit, Amsterdam, Nairobi... some cities around the world have pioneered local food action. Two pieces of work published this year (Halliday, 2017; IPES-Food, 2017) present insights from these pioneers.

Here is an overview of key advice for any city willing to embark on a food policy provided by [Jess Halliday](#), the author of these works.

First, do your homework

An obvious first step for any policy is to carry out a bit of research to better understand the context and the challenges. This should include both baseline research on key food-related issues, but also a more general analysis of the policy environment and the city government's key priorities, in order to link to them.

It can be useful to work with researchers here. For instance, in Amsterdam, politicians and civil servants collaborated with academics to develop a strong conceptual framework for its Healthy Weight program.

Second, know your policy levers... and how to change them if necessary

Urban food policy makers should then analyse what is possible for them, given their political and administrative context. Depending on the country they are located in, different city governments each have different levers available to them -- that is, policy domains or responsibilities. For instance, the Mayor of New York is able to restrict the use of unhealthy trans fats in fast food restaurants, whereas his London counterpart does not have any legislative power and can only promote voluntary approaches to healthier eating.

This might be frustrating, as you may see that other cities are doing great things that you are not able to do. Is this a problem? According to Jess Halliday, who co-authored the IPES Food report and wrote a chapter on pioneers in the book *Construire des politiques alimentaires urbaines. Concepts et démarches*, **it is important to understand who does what, and at which level, in order to influence the right people** - or even to request new powers! For instance, Greater Philadelphia (USA) lobbied State authorities to provide tax relief and incentives for agriculture to promote production of fresh food for local markets. The City of Detroit (USA), meanwhile, found that it did

not have the authority to regulate urban agriculture due to the State-level Michigan Right to Farm Act, so it had to negotiate with State-level bodies to obtain that authority.

Third, be prepared to talk to a lot of people!

Food policy advocates should also talk to a lot of people:

- Within the local authority itself. Food is by nature a transversal issue, and it is very likely that food-related actors will be scattered around the administration (urban planning, education, public tender, local economic development...) -- yet in most cities it is not the primary, core responsibility of any one department. As Jess Halliday puts it: **“food is everyone’s business and no-one’s business”**. For that reason, some cities have put in place cross-departmental training to enable civil servants from different departments to share a common language on the issue. Nairobi has done just this, to ensure that its public health and planning teams are on the same page when it comes to implementing the Nairobi Urban Agriculture Promotion and Regulation Act. Belo Horizonte, on the other hand, went a step further by setting up a dedicated agency to coordinate all food matters in the city.
- Throughout your city and beyond. **City governments cannot act alone**. They need to engage with a wide array of stakeholders at the local level, including civil society and food businesses. Thanks to a great job done by civil society in Nairobi, previously disempowered farmers now have a collective voice in food policy. On the other side of the world, the food advocates in Canada's rapidly urbanizing Golden Horseshoe (the region around Greater Toronto) have found new ways to involve busy food business owners, by consulting with them on a one-to-one basis or by organizing one-off special events. Food policy makers should also hear from the people who will be the most affected by the policy, and feedback to them about what works and what does not.

Fourth, be flexible in the way you organize your action

Another key insight is that, **when it comes to organizing the city’s action, there is no “one size fits all” solution**. If food policy councils ([see our last blog article on food policy councils](#)) are gaining quite a lot of attention, they are not the only way of going about developing food action. Other solutions include making it a formal and explicit mission of the local authority, or, on the other end of the spectrum, relying on civil society’s ability to organize the action.

What you will choose will depend on the structure of the local administration, the local political will, and the level of existing trust between actors. In Bristol there is a long tradition of civil society activism and engagement with government, a food policy council was formed both to seek policy influence from outside Council structures and to generate wide awareness of food issues among citizens. But according to Jess Halliday, this may not work elsewhere. In Manchester, for example, where civil society has traditionally been less influential, the food policy body is embedded within city government structures (although civil society groups and food businesses are invited to participate in the advisory group).

One key point to bear in mind though, is that **your institutional home should provide you with some channels of influence on policy**. That means if public health, say, is a major priority for the city, locating the food body within the public health team can give it a direct channel to top-level policy-makers. If it is located outside government structures, channels of influence should be provided by engaging civil servants who have the ear of policy makers.

Fifth, be prepared for long-term action

Last but not least, food policy does not happen overnight. It takes time, and even in cities that have a track record in successful policy, civil servants can feel quite insecure as policy priorities change over the years. This is why **specific efforts should be invested into setting up proper evaluation methodologies and gather sufficient data in order to demonstrate progress.**

One last point is to organize food policy in order to survive electoral cycles. Being able to point to data showing that a policy or program is working makes it more difficult for incoming local officials to end a policy or program from one day to the next. It is also helpful for the food policy work to be deeply embedded into city structures and day-to-day ways of working, and for multi-actor governance to be in place so that it is not solely reliant on the support of city leaders.

With these key pieces of advice in mind, now is time to kick off food policy in your city!

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Source:

[Halliday, J. \(2017\), « Objectifs et leviers des villes pour une alimentation durable », in Brand, C. et al. \(2017\), Construire des politiques alimentaires urbaines. Concepts et démarches. Editions Quae, Versailles](#)
[IPES-Food. 2017. What makes urban food policy happen? Insights from five case studies. International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems](#)

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