Quick-scanning your food policy

The city of Basel (Switzerland) recently started developing a food policy. In order to do so, it worked with a team of researchers from the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture to develop a "quick scan" of its existing actions without having to spend too much time to gather a lot of (and sometimes missing) data. This tool allows cities to compare their action with best practices from other cities and to identify untapped areas of work, while ensuring that local stakeholders get on board.

Basel's experience and methodology can be useful for other cities just starting to get involved in food policy.

Comparing your action to best practices… in a systematic way

The methodology relies on two principles:

- **Taking a systematic approach**. It covers 97 indicators that span across four dimensions of sustainability (good governance, environmental integrity, economic resilience and social well-being). These are adapted from the SAFA themes that were developed by the FAO to harmonize existing food systems assessment frameworks.

- **Comparing one's action to best practice**. For each of the 97 indicators, researchers defined what the best practice could be in Basel by looking at what other, more engaged cities, were doing.

The researchers gathered information on Basel's existing action through an analysis of online resources and interviews with local food system stakeholders. For each indicator, they then gave a grade on a scale from 0% (when existing actions did not contribute at all to this indicator) to 100% (when the city's action was equal to existing best practice). This process allows to transform qualitative inputs into quantitative data, that can then be aggregated, thus **providing a tool that enables analysis while not overburdening cities with data search.**

For instance, researchers identified that some cities around the world have implemented incentives such as central compost containers or subsidies for smaller/private compost containers. The City of Basel scored a 100% on this "food waste compositing" indicator because it provides advice and composting areas. However, it only scored 25% on the verification of compliance for food procurement, as audits or controls of contractors are not usually carried out

Results were then aggregated into spider diagrams. According to Jan Landert, who led the research, this aggregation is good to give a first overview of where the city stands and to facilitate discussion, but more precise areas of actions can only be identified through a review of each indicator.

Getting an idea of potential, but still untapped, areas for action

This methodology is geared towards local action. In other words, it does not provide an overall assessment of the sustainability of the food system in a given city, but **it provides a quick-scan of the potential policy levers embodied in the 97 indicators.** For that reason, it can only be used by cities that have some margin of manoeuvre on food policy and enough human or financial resources to carry out some actions.

As it is systematic, it points to actions that city officials might have overlooked. Indeed, indicators cover a wide array of issues:

- Good governance (participation, rule of law…)
- Environmental integrity (water, land, biodiversity…)
- Economic resilience (investment, local economy…)
- Social well-being (decent livelihood, labour rights, equity…)

For instance, in the city of Basel, one area of action that emerged during the assessment was transparency, i.e. the requirement that all activities, laws, ordinances and contracts with private caterers are accessible publicly, and that public canteens publish the origin of their raw materials. Another lever that may have been overlooked without this quick-scanning method is the fact that the city's public pension scheme can integrate criteria to avoid land-conflicts in its investment guidelines.

A tool to engage food system stakeholders

The methodology builds on stakeholders' consultation. Indeed, in Basel, the 97 indicators were discussed with local stakeholders to ensure their local relevance and to decide on which weight to put on which indicators at the aggregation stage. According to Jan Landert, **working with stakeholders is key to adding value to the process**. Indeed, the methodology will only be relevant for the city if it is tailored to its local context.

As Basel was only at the early stages of its food policy, it did not know all of its food system stakeholders yet. This research therefore brought them together for the first time. Indeed, this "quick-scan" exercise acted as a stepping-stone for further policy development. The City of Basel is now defining priorities in its food policy with these stakeholders. The methodology therefore helped the city to embark on a wider policy process.