The A to Z of urban food analysis

Looking for tools to analyse your city-region food system? Check out the FAO-RUAF toolkit!

No matter what tool you use to build your food policy, never forget to keep the momentum in your core stakeholder group.

Urban food policy is about social, economic, technical and environmental challenges. It is about production, transportation, consumption, waste management... And it is about bringing together the relevant stakeholders to move forwards. In other word, it is a tremendously complex undertaking. As such, it can be daunting.

This is why the FAO and RUAF embarked in 2015 in a 3 years journey with seven cities to develop a methodology that any city around the world can apply. The result of their work was published in a very comprehensive Toolkit called “Assessing and planning sustainable city region food systems”.

Draw a map of your city region

What exactly is a city region? The authors define it as: “the complex network of actors, processes and relationships to do with food production, processing, marketing, and consumption that exist in a given geographical region that includes a more or less concentrated urban centre and its surrounding peri-urban and rural hinterland; a regional landscape across which flows of people, goods and ecosystem services are managed”.

Such an approach acknowledges that cities cannot do much by themselves. They are dependent upon other places to feed themselves, and what they do impact areas outside of their boundaries as well. As such, the city-region lenses allow for a coherent approach that spans across policy scales and takes into account urban-rural relationships.

However, how can a city concretely draw a map of its city-region that is relevant to its food policy? Analysing the experience of the seven cities, the authors conclude that finding the right scale is about reaching a balance between agricultural, environmental, economic, social and political relevance. So each city will identify its own city-region boundaries. For instance, in Utrecht (The Netherlands), it was decided to choose Utrecht municipality with nine other neighbouring municipalities because these were already grouped into a network, which would give them the availability to take action.
Once boundaries are chosen, the authors remind us that it is important to draw a map to materialise the city region. This is help stakeholders better understand it.

Set priorities for the analysis

The toolkit then moves on to a quick scan of the food system of your city region. This is very important as there are a great number of areas that you can analyse, but you want to focus on the ones that are really important for the sustainability of your own particular food system. If you skip this step, you might end up with way too much on your plate, and the danger would be to lose all stakeholders in a long process.

The two questions here are:

- What are the key priority areas that need to be addressed to develop a more sustainable and resilient food system for the future?
- What are the 5-10 main data gaps and key issues that require further research and in-depth assessment?

The toolkit provides a number of very specific tools that will help you quickly scan your food system, map your stakeholders and help them come up with key areas of investigation. You can for instance use the consultative stakeholders workshops guidance, or a variety of stakeholder mapping tools.

For example, in Lusaka (Zambia), stakeholders decided to focus on three priorities:

- the food distribution system (with questions about location and seasonality of food markets, or transport infrastructure),
- sustainable production (with issues such as skills and training) and
- food security and consumption (covering themes such as nutritional value or storage and preservation).

In Quito (Columbia), stakeholders realised that they needed to know more about the city's vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters.

Carry out an in-depth analysis of selected issues

Next step? It is time to carry out in-depth analysis of the issues that the stakeholders have selected. Depending on the city's context, it can vary from mapping food flows, as what done in Medellin (Colombia) or assessing the degree of self-sufficiency in Quito (Ecuador).

The quality of the assessment will rely on that of the data gathered as well as the methodology used to retrieve it. The toolkit provides guidance on data collection, as well as a number of examples of existing analysis on very specific points (such as the analysis of community vulnerability to climate change, or of food insecurity) that will help cities better understand how to carry out such analysis. As such, it is therefore quite adaptable and will fit any city's needs. It is important to make sure from the start that the team that will carry out the research has enough capacity to do so. A good briefing of that team upfront is welcome.

Move from knowledge to action!

Upon completion of the CRFS assessment, any city should have a clearer idea of what the priorities for action are. The fact that the assessment process is carried out in a participative way should make it easier to move from knowledge to action. The toolkit provides examples of cities such as Colombo (Sri Lanka) or Toronto (Canada) that have used the analysis to build policy scenarios.

The toolkit also provide two very useful tools for any city willing to move from knowledge to action:

- An indicator framework that offers a selection of 210 possible indicators, aligned with the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, to track progress of action. Any policy goal can therefore be matched with one or several indicators that can be used as baseline information. For instance, if one of your goals is to improve health and well-being and increase access to food and nutrition, one possible indicator could be the reduction in number and proportion of households without access to adequate food storage and cooking facilities (for different income groups). Another possible indicator could be the...
change in number of food retail outlets located in or near to low-income neighbourhoods that sell fresh fruit & vegetables.

- A **Food governance barometer**, that allow cities to understand strong and weak points in their food governance. The Barometer is based on the governance section of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact. It will help cities ask themselves the right questions about, for instance, whether they facilitate collaboration across city agencies and departments and seek alignment of policies and programmes, or if they develop a disaster risk reduction strategy to enhance the resilience of urban food systems.

Joy Carey, from RUAF, who was part of the project team, reminds us that such frameworks can only really be a tool in a larger process. **In the end, what’s important is to keep the momentum in the core stakeholder group, not so much which particular tool you use.**

With such a toolkit, cities now have all the cards they need to develop strong urban food policies!

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**Source:**


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