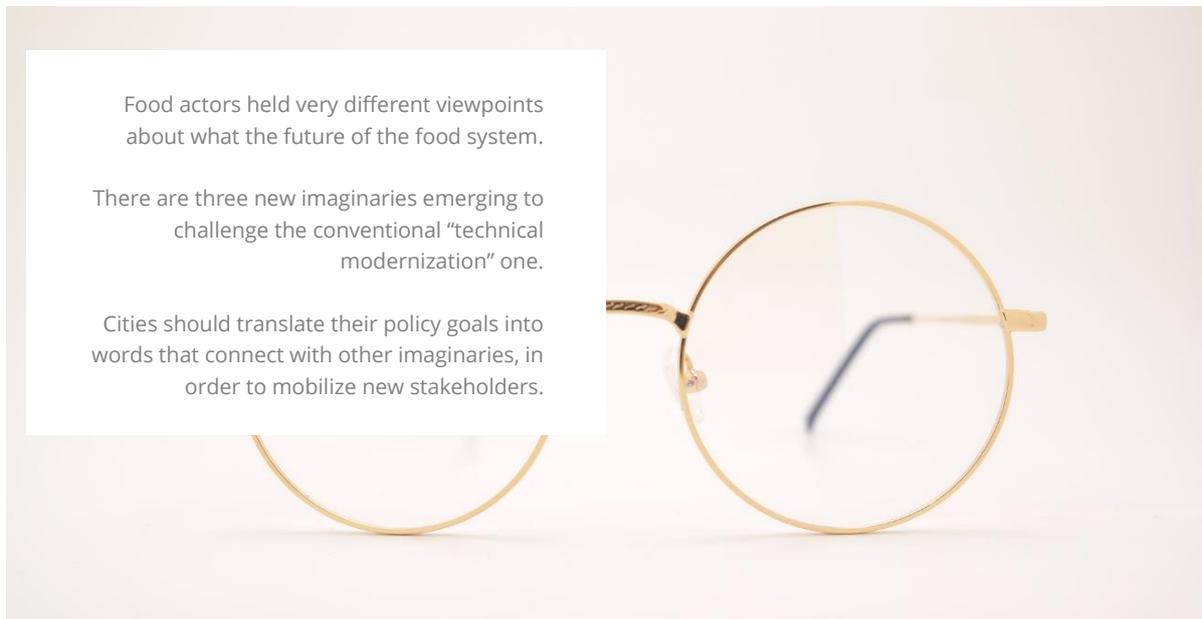


# Seeing food futures through different lenses



Participation is key to urban food policies. However, cities often fail to mobilise a variety of stakeholders beyond the “usual” urban food activists. In a paper published in 2018, Paul Thompson, from Michigan State University (United States), reminds us that food actors held very different viewpoints about what the future of the food system should be. Better understanding the imaginaries that drive food actors is therefore a useful first step to starting a dialogue with them.

Albane GASPARD  
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Urban Food Futures thanks [Paul Thompson](#) for his inputs and comments.

**Source:**  
[Thompson, PB \(2018\), “Four sociotechnical imaginaries for future food systems”, \*Professionals in food chains\*, pp. 187-191](#)

**Picture credits:**  
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<http://www.urbanfoodfutures.com/imaginaries>

## The incumbent: technical modernisation

The author sketches four main imaginaries about the future of the food system. **These imaginaries are big overarching ideas about the present and the future that frame the way people see reality and drive their action.** It is therefore important to know them to understand the way they see the world.

**The first imaginary is that of technical modernisation.** It emerged when the industrialisation process met the food system. This led to changes in the way food was grown in the fields (with the progress of mechanisation and the use of chemicals), processed (with the development of food factories), and consumed (with tremendous changes in people’s kitchens).

Under such an imaginary, market mechanisms are the key drivers of action. Actors in the food system are conceptualised as economic actors that are exclusively profit-driven and will respond to prices and market opportunities.

## The three challengers

This imaginary based on technical modernisation is now challenged by actors that share very different views about how the food system is going,



and, above all, where it should and can go. This maps out new imaginaries, among which:

- **The “Sustainable intensification” imaginary.** It relies on the idea that the existing food system is not well equipped to feed the world, especially under population growth and climate change assumptions. Its objective is therefore to “feed the world”. In this imaginary, **the focus is on increasing productivity and the overall food system’s efficiency.** This means making a better use of land and water, and fighting food losses. The thinking behind it is to **reduce the burden that agriculture places on the environment** in the form of pollution and drain on ecosystem services.
- **The “Regional food system” imaginary appeared as a reaction to food systems seen as purely profit-driven.** The idea is that food is not only about profit but also about the social links that it builds between actors. This imaginary catch phrase could be “controlling one’s food destiny”. This translates into short chains, farmers’ markets, food hubs... A core assumption for the future is that *“food will be produced on farms and these farms will confirm to the owner-operated household enterprise stereotype that has typified the majority of food systems since the invention of agriculture”*. This imaginary, is, however, not void of contradictions: according to Paul Thompson, a key one is the tension between consumers and producers in the search of both social justice and inexpensive prices.

### **The ambiguous imaginary around urban agriculture**

The third challenger appeared more recently. It is different for the previous ones in that it is **mainly driven by urban stakeholders**. Paul Thompson calls it the **“urban agriculture” imaginary**.

It emerged from actors in metropolis feeling the urge to provide large urban populations with food. It relies on the sense that urban groups need to have more control over the food system.

Interestingly, the author stresses that this imaginary is quite new and not very coherent. More specifically, he highlights a central ambiguity in urban agriculture’s imaginary:

- On the one hand, it is driven by a “feeding the city” motto. As such, it relates to sustainable intensification, and current research and development around high tech urban agriculture perfectly illustrates this objective.
- On the other hand, it is also motivated by social objectives, such as social cohesion or education. These translate into community gardens or city farms.

**Such an ambiguity explains the great diversity of urban agriculture actors and projects, but also points to a possible difficulty in bringing them together, as their objectives are quite different, maybe even diverging.**

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### **Taking into account stakeholders' imaginaries in food policy processes**

How to merge such imaginaries, and whether they will ever become compatible, is an open question. Can we re-imagine the food system in a way that prevents key tensions between imaginaries from becoming blocking points?

As of now, this map of key imaginaries is however a useful tool for cities to navigate their food stakeholders. Indeed, knowing that the actors they work with are likely to relate to one of these four imaginaries will help urban policy makers step out of their own mind set.

Furthermore, **it will prompt them to translate their policy goals into words that connect with other imaginaries, in order to mobilise new stakeholders.** For instance, if a city has put a lot of emphasis on equity issues, it might also want to explain how its actions are also contributing to feeding urban populations in a context of population growth and climate change. This way, it will be able to mobilise those stakeholders that are actively working on sustainable intensification. Hence imaginaries will have an impact on real-life actions taken by cities.

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