

What do your policy documents reveal about your urban food action?

Analysis of urban food policy documents shows that very few of them include a clear implementation plan.

Cities struggle to go further than policies on production and consumption, and fail to address activities in between (transformation, for example).

Cities have still little knowledge about actual food flows. This lack of knowledge prevents them from identifying areas where policies would be needed.

As more and more cities around the world are adopting formal food policy strategies, researchers are looking in more details into what cities say they'll be doing, and how. Two papers have recently analysed closely these policy documents. They looked at what is in them, but also what is not. Indeed, looking at policy documents reveals interesting gaps in current urban food policies.

Different contexts, but same goals...?

What goals do cities give themselves when it comes to food? Looking at them says a lot about the context in which they operate. For instance, objectives regarding food security, nutrition and access to food are more mobilised by cities in the Global South. However, they are not absent from the North, even if they are framed differently. For instance, Northern American cities talk about "healthy neighbourhoods" and "food deserts", which also refers to access issues. French cities tend to have goals related to public procurement more often than other cities, echoing the dynamism of national regulations on collective catering.

Interestingly though, even if different contexts lead to different goals being pursued, researchers also found great similarities. **Four themes appear more often than others, namely: local food production, agriculture, economic development (including better distribution channels) and education.** And some are almost always missing, such as climate change mitigation, adaptation, or animal health/welfare. Are all cities facing the same problems, or has the dialogue between them over the years contributed to harmonizing their take on food issues? (see our previous article on [The limits of a "copy and paste" approach](#)).

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[Jeroen J. L. Candel \(2019\): What's on the menu? A global assessment of MUFPP signatory cities' food strategies, Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems](#)

[Sonnino, R. Tegoni, C. De Cunto, A. \(2019\) The challenge of systemic food change: Insights from cities. Cities, Vol. 85, pp. 110-116](#)

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... and same instruments?

Similarities are also found in the policy instruments cities say they will use. Educational and financial instruments (such as grants or subsidies, public procurement, allowing the use of government owned land, providing food aid...) are very often mentioned.

More stringent instruments, such as regulation, are less common. (Cities in the United States are more likely to use them. For instance, New York has a regulatory policy to preserve gardens). Is this because the regulatory context cities around the world generally operate in makes it difficult for them to use such instruments? Or is it because urban food policies shy away from them?

Goals, but no implementation plan

Another point that calls attention in these policy documents is their lack of clear implementation plan. Researchers looked in details at the formal strategies of 41 cities that signed the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact.

35 provided information about the actions, and the instruments they will implement, but **only 9 of our 41 include specific targets and associated time-paths**. Some cities such as Brussels, Medellin or Sao Paulo are very thorough. But, for others, it is hard to gauge whether written goals will turn into action.

Urban strategies are missing entire parts of the food system

A key dimension that comes out of the papers is that entire parts of the food system are missing from policy documents. Researchers call it the “missing middle”, pointing to food system activities “between” production and consumption, that are absent from policies. Namely: transformation and distribution (see our previous article [Food processing: the missing link in sustainable food systems](#)).

Why is that? Researchers make several hypothesis:

- First, **food policy actors have historically focused either on production or consumption**. As these two categories of actors come together in local food policies, they still haven't reached out to other stakeholders, that represent this “missing middle”.
- Second, **cities have still little knowledge about actual food flows**. This lack of knowledge prevents them from identifying areas where policies would be needed.
- Third, activities in the “missing middle” are often regulated at regional, national or even international levels. And as it appeared from the policy documents or the focus-groups researchers carried out, **cities are not actively integrating higher levels in their governance. This focus on the local could lead to them missing on wider systemic issues.**

Therefore, **a key take-away for cities willing to go further would be to take the time to map food flows coming in and out** ([see our previous article on methodology for urban food system analysis](#)). This will help them identify how they contribute to a wider food system, the issues this raises, and what they can do about it.

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