

# Are food commons the next innovation pathway for urban food policies?

What is at the heart of the commons is a decision made by a community that some resources should be governed by all for everybody's interest, because those resources are essential to all. In this sense, food can be valued as a commons.

Our societies have turned a fundamental need into a for-profit commodity.

If cities were to recognize that food is not only a commodity, then it would open great opportunities for innovation



The concept of “commons” is one of these ideas that is difficult to pin down: what exactly are commons? And what do they have to do with food? In a book co-edited by Jose Luis Vivero-Pol, Tomaso Ferrando, Olivier De Schutter and Ugo Mattei, called the *Routledge Handbook of Food as a Commons*, engaged scholars and activists from different backgrounds introduce us to this notion and give us a peak into what food policies relying on the premise that food is a commons could look like.

## Many definitions...

An interesting issue with the concept of commons is that it does not have only one definition. As Jose Luis Vivero Pol, who co-edited the book, puts it: “commons can be different things to different people”.

Different academic disciplines define commons in different ways. For example

- **For economists, it may equal to a public good**, i.e. a good that is both non-excludable and non-rivalrous. In other words, a good everyone can access, and whose consumption by one person does not prevent others from enjoying. Typical examples are fresh air or cooking recipes. But it may also equal to club goods (those that are rival but difficult to exclude), such as fish stocks or water.
- For historians, however, commons often refers to collectively owned land that was commonplace in Europe before the Enclosure movement, and still represents about 5% of European land today (and yet common land is not mentioned once in the new CAP documents or in the recently published “From Farm to Fork” Strategy).

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Urban Food Futures would like to thank [Jose Luis Vivero Pol](#) for his inputs and comments.

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In order to make things even more complicated, **activists have also used the term commons when campaigning to preserve customary rights over natural resources** such as land, forests, seeds or water. Social activists are also using “commons” terminology to define contemporary food initiatives such as community-supported agriculture, food buying groups, food sharing platforms or guerrilla gardening initiatives. This multiplicity of meanings of the “commons” is both an advantage (to recognize and embrace existing approaches) and a constraint. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to set boundaries between common, public and private (for-profit) spheres.

One could get lost in such a web of definitions, and even start thinking that “commons” are just a new catch phrase that encompasses everything, and, therefore, well, nothing. This is why it is important to define it properly.

### Is food a commons?

So what is the essence of commons? Interestingly, the editors of the book do not concur with the understanding that renders the intrinsic characteristics of a particular resource the key determinant that turns it into a commons.

For them, **what is at the heart of the commons is a decision made by a community that some resources (whether material or not) should be governed by all for everybody’s interest, because those resources are essential to all.** Commons are determined by the “commoning” practices devised to govern any given resource. In other words, even if you could exclude others from benefiting from these resources, the whole community could decide that no-one should be excluded. So what lies at the core of the concept is a society’s or community’s decision. Commons and commoning are social constructs designed and accepted by specific communities.

**In this sense, food can be valued as a commons, if society so decides, largely based on its essentialness for human survival.** Economists would say it is not a public good, as it is excludable (you cannot eat the apple I have just eaten). However, if the community decides that it is a common, and should therefore be managed in such a way that everyone can access it, then it is. Commons are not determined by intrinsic features, but by external governing mechanisms.

### The development of markets

So if food can be considered as a commons, how comes it is not treated as such in western societies? This is chiefly the result of **a historical process and political decisions that turned a fundamental need into a for-profit commodity.**

How did this happen? In an historical chapter of the book, John O’Neill dates this back to classical philosophers and economists such as John Locke or Adam Smith. Their concern was individual freedom and independence from church and feudal lords, and such thinkers saw in the market a great way to achieve this. Indeed, on a market, you can access goods and services regardless of the nature of your relationship with the person that sells them. In a way, monetized markets were great because they provided individual autonomy.

However, their development also came with two side effects:

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- First, **they merely replaced personal dependence** (that of a serf from his master, for instance) **by new forms of objective dependence**. If you don't have money, you are excluded from the market. No money, no food.
- Second, **by focusing only on monetary exchange, they “freed men from any sense of obligation to or for other men”**. Deeply rooted human traditions such as gifts, reciprocity, conviviality, cooperation and mutual dependence based on common neediness were replaced by monetary exchanges with no further liabilities.

### And food became a commodity

The authors call this process the “commodification of food”, to describe **the reduction of multiple (and not monetizable) dimensions of food to its tradable features, that can be valued and exchanged in monetary terms (based on demand-supply equilibrium, or the invisible hand of the market)**. .

The consequences in nowadays modern economies are:

- **The exclusion of people that cannot pay for their food.** Access is constrained by purchasing power, which raises moral concerns. *“Food as a commodity conflicts with food as a need or food as a human right”*. Indeed, if food is a commons, then people's ability to pay should not be a ground for exclusion. That would pave the ground for a Universal Food Coverage, mirroring similar schemes developed in western countries for health or education (both valued as public goods).
- **The constant search for profit:** *“if food is a commodity only, what you want is sell it at the highest price”*, and more is always the better. In such a system, food suppliers will always try to make it more expensive (gaining more per unit) or cut production costs, leading to detrimental impacts on the workers or the environment. Actually, private food actors get more profit by promoting higher consumption of food, what lies behind the obesity pandemic that ravages all countries.
- **The exclusion of all other dimensions of food.** Food is not just a commodity. It also has, for instance, vibrant cultural or social dimensions that cannot be traded under market terms. And it is a fundamental human need (what is the price of essentialness?). Food policies that discard these dimensions miss on the core of what food means to humans (individually and socially).

### What would a food systems based on commons look like?

So where does that leave us as far as food policy is concerned? What would it mean in practical terms, if we are going to translate this narrative shift into policy proposals?

**First, food should be recognized as a fundamental human right and the food system organized to enforce this right for all.** Indeed, *“need gives a person claims on others”*, i.e. rights. According to Jose Luis Vivero Pol, this would not be different from what most countries do regarding health and education. Therefore, if we change the way we see food, then we start unlocking unpermitted ideas and we discover that there could be other ways to allocate such an essential resource.



**This entails a proper governance** with collective actions (self-organised people doing things by themselves, with no state support or market incentives behind). It is not just about everyone trying to access the resource without concern for the community. In a chapter about South Africa, Patrick Bond and Mary Galvin describe how self-help movements to access water could have negative impacts on the water system as a whole.

**Second, access to food should not rely exclusively on purchasing power.** Everybody should have an entitlement to a minimal access to food, which entails that the market should not be the only way to access it. **This, however, does not mean extending charity (i.e. food banks).** Indeed, receiving charity is very different from asserting one's rights. If food is a fundamental human right, accessing it should not come with the stigma of queuing at charity premises to get donated food that other use to get vat exceptions.

### Cities can play a role

Defining food as a commons is at the same time an old consideration (found in many ancient civilisations and current indigenous cosmovisions) and a new alternative to the hegemonic narrative of food as a commodity. Therefore, tangible examples of what this would mean are yet to be developed. Benefits and drawbacks will appear more clearly as experiences develop. And we could greatly benefit from other non-western cultures and non-capitalist narratives and modes of production (Epistemologies of the South, as defined by Boaventura de Sousa) However, according to Jose Luis Vivero Pol, **if cities were to recognise, in their food policies, that food is not only a commodity, then it would open great opportunities for innovation.**

For instance, cities could support other means of food allocation that rely on collective arrangements (based on mobile apps or proximity relationships within neighbourhoods), provided eaters get a say in how the process is organised (i.e. urban food councils already found in hundreds of cities). This could be a way to deepen food democracy, by encompassing alternative movements that share the opposition to the commodification of food, such as food justice, food sovereignty, degrowth or agroecology...

What would tomorrow's cities look like if councils work with citizens to enforce the right to food? That would mean thriving urban spaces where the entire food system is geared towards satisfying human needs for all, instead of maximizing profit for the food corporations that are dominant in long food chains. Back to the drawing board...

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