

Navigating the sinuous path of urban food strategies



Developing urban food policies is a constant re-adjustment process. It can be an opportunity for urban food movements to become reflexive and widen the scope of their action.

The local food movement should be prepared to forge new alliances, connect to a wider set of actors and organisations, and develop a stronger collective voice.

Never take legitimacy of local food action for granted. Documenting achievements can help in this direction.

Toronto is one of the star cities in urban food policies. Its food movement dates back to the 1980's and has inspired hundreds of cities around the world. Its longevity means that it had to go through different stages, with tensions and breakthroughs.

What can other cities learn from their elder sister? In an article published in the *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, Alessandra Manganelli compares Toronto's long path with Brussels' more recent one. She shows that developing urban food policies is a constant re-adjustment process, where food actors need to re-invent themselves, recast their values, or bring in new narratives as the movement develops. However, this should not only be seen as a burden. It can also be an opportunity for urban food movements to become reflexive and widen the scope of their action.

Urban food policy making is not a smooth process

Both the long history of Toronto's food policy, and Brussels' shorter one show that the institutionalisation of food action into a policy is not a smooth process. Indeed, the formation of a food movement and the development of a more institutionalised food policy encompass different stages (movement formation, coalition building, strategy formalisation, implementation pathways), all bringing about tensions and challenges

The early years of food action constitute moments of hybrid interactions among bottom-up food initiatives, knitting coalitions among themselves and with other organisations and institutional players. Key values and aspirations emerge in these moments. In Toronto, for instance, the will to remedy conditions of food insecurity merged with the will to foster a healthy city agenda, where food is considered as a social determinant of health.

Albane GASPARD
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[Alessandra Manganelli \(2020\): Realising local food policies: a comparison between Toronto and the Brussels-Capital Region's stories through the lenses of reflexivity and colearning. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*](#)

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Once the strategy is adopted, **new challenges emerge at the implementation stage**. For instance, bottom-up initiatives may have to change their way of working with the municipality, as the process becomes more formalized. In Brussels, for instance, a tender process was introduced which pushed local food actors to compete with each other or with new private players. Therefore, this phase may lead to tensions in collaborative dynamics, which foster the building of new kind of relations compared to the earlier stages.

Wider changes or crises can come up

In most cases, the wider socio-economic and institutional landscape exercises an impact on the local food policy process.

Both the history of Toronto and Brussels demonstrate that. Examples of such changes and crises are:

- **New elections:** Brussels elected majority changed right before the launch of its food strategy. Although it did not put a halt to the process in this particular case, it entailed less budget and less structural support to food organisations.
- **Changes in the wider institutional-administrative landscape:** at the end of the 1990's, Toronto changed drastically as the old City of Toronto went through a merging process with the surrounding municipalities. Thus, from being a city of 650.000 inhabitants Toronto turned into one of 2.3 million. This put great pressure on the Toronto Food Policy Council. Indeed, the Council used to work with a progressive city, and, all of a sudden, it had to re-assert its very identity and legitimacy with a new, more conservative administrative bureaucracy.
- **External crises:** in Toronto, the food movement actually started in the wake of the global economic crisis of the 1970's-1980s. At that time, actors and organisations started to mobilise, also bringing in new approaches to food insecurity beyond the food banks' model, as to provide longer-term and more structural solutions to hunger and food insecurity. Interestingly, though, the 2008 economic crisis did not lead to substantial changes in food actors' take on policy, at least with respect to the food strategy development, and in particular for the case of Brussels. Indeed, at that time leading Brussels' food actors and organisations were more concerned about environmental challenges, giving a less pronounced attention to food insecurity, at least until the more recent phase. In sum, **crises can play a different role. They certainly represent threats to the food movement, but they can also open up new opportunities to forge new alliances, reflect upon the value of a local food action, and connect the local to the global with the purpose to foster a revived food system agenda.** Some of these lessons can be transferred to the current Covid-19 crisis and the recovery opportunities it brings about for the present-future.

Adjusting and branching out

In sum, Alessandra Manganelli shows that key changes in the wider socio-economic and institutional landscape can put into threat local food actors and organisations, as they challenge their legitimacy, and sometimes their very existence. Yet, these phenomena can also become opportunities to

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widen the scope of action and recast the role and legitimacy of urban food movements.

What is key here is actors' reflexivity, i.e. their ability to re-examine and re-position their narratives and their action to adapt to change.

Indeed, as Alessandra Manganelli stresses: *"what is really interesting in the case of Toronto is the aspect of relation building: the ability of local food actors to create new coalitions and collaborations, opening new fields of action"*.

An example of that are new coalitions formed in Toronto after the city "amalgamation" process at the end of the 1990s. With the will to open up new progressive agendas for the food movement, local leaders, including food movement actors, formed a new Environmental Task force able to pass a very progressive Environmental Plan for the City, including actions for local food production, green roofs, community gardens and so on. Alongside, a Food and Hunger Action Committee was formed. The value of this Committee was to help launching the Toronto Food Charter, which constituted the new terms of reference for the Toronto Food Policy Council. Thus, the Council had a new mission and field of action: helping to implement the Charter, inspired by principles of the Right to food.

Nowadays, Alessandra Manganelli suggests that the connection of environmental challenges (sustainable and resilient food systems, climate mitigation-adaptation) with food justice challenges (the recognition of socio-racial inequities in food systems - [see our previous article on food justice](#)) are key drivers of reflexivity for the global food movement, and can help food movements to open up new lenses and meanings to their action.

In addition, the greater internationalisation and connectivity of urban food movements across the globe can provide pathways for **branching out, reinforcing the legitimacy of food movements, as well as learning from one another.**

Prepare for change

The institutionalisation of food action at the local level is therefore a sinuous and controversial process. How should food actors deal with it? A key take-away that emerges from this research is that a **constant re-adjustment is normal and it should be taken as an opportunity by food movement actors to strengthen their reflexivity, i.e. their capacity to self-reflect upon their role, values and adapt their agendas accordingly.**

What does this involve?

- **Be prepared to forge new alliances, connect to a wider set of actors** and organisations, and develop a stronger collective voice.
- Be strategic and ready to take incremental steps while watching out for opportunities to advance a food system agenda. Cultivating leadership and building relations with key actors (e.g. policy officials and competent/enthusiast civil servants) can help in this direction. Lots can be done also outside the scope of a formal food strategy.
- **Anticipate changes in governments' coalitions as well as wider socio-institutional disruptions.** This involves strengthening your organisation's financial structure, diversifying funding sources, cultivate a strong organisational as well as conflict management capacity.
- Never take legitimacy of local food action for granted, on the contrary, continue to fight for it and assert it. **Documenting achievements** can help in this direction. **Making the food**

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movement more democratic and inclusive of different voices is also essential.

Progressive and visionary local-regional authorities play a key role in sustaining urban food movements. Initiatives such as food policy councils and food strategies can help to build reflexivity, navigate changes, as well as reinvigorate the local food movement in face of challenges. Yet, these initiatives need to be supported by sustainable and progressive forms of governance and institutional structures to reinforce their role.

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