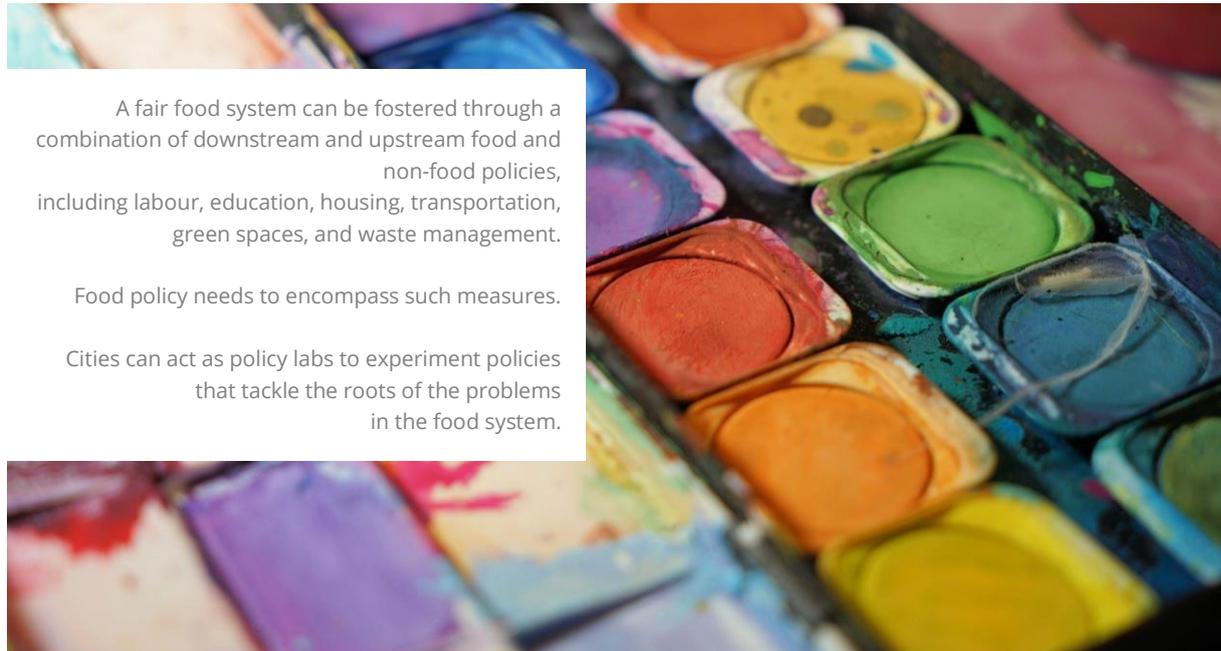


Food policy: not just about food



A fair food system can be fostered through a combination of downstream and upstream food and non-food policies, including labour, education, housing, transportation, green spaces, and waste management.

Food policy needs to encompass such measures.

Cities can act as policy labs to experiment policies that tackle the roots of the problems in the food system.

Cities are living laboratories. They are melting pots of interactions between activists, practitioners, entrepreneurs, and local government administrators. When they are brought together around complex problems, such as food systems, this can foster active participation in shaping policy. While cities have limited control or impact on primary production or food distribution, they are responsible for urban land use, public health, education, transport, and sanitation. All of which impact or are impacted by the food system.

Food policies are often siloed within certain departments or restricted by what can be achieved between election cycles. But **the role of policy in food systems is broader than that, and well-designed plans can be nimble, innovative, and cross boundaries, budgets, departments, siloes, and scales.**

The case of New York City

Stemming back to the 1960s, New York City's policymakers and activists have been attempting to address food insecurity, hunger, access, and production. The early 2000s saw a rise in interest around obesity, nutrition, and public health. **Successive New York City administrations focused first on discrete policies to address issues; then through coordinated approaches. Most recently, they turned to networked policies that broaden food system policy to include social and economic equity.**

In their recent paper published in *Food Policy*, Nevin Cohen and Rositsa Ilieva explore this progression, and the downstream and upstream policies that have grown around food in New York City:

Emma Burnett
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Urban Food Futures would like to thank [Nevin Cohen](#) for his inputs and comments

Source:
[Cohen and Ilieva \(2021\). Expanding the boundaries of food policy: The turn to equity in New York City. Food Policy, 103](#)

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<http://www.urbanfoodfutures.com/not-just-about-food>



- Downstream policies are those that focus on mitigation and treatment of a problem.
- Upstream policies are those that address social or economic determinants that lead to the problem. These include not just addressing nutrition and access, but expanding into equity in housing, education, procurement, and employment.

Treating problems

Downstream policies can improve outcomes for particular communities or manage specific problems. **These can be relatively quick and easy to implement, but are often only palliative, may reinforce some already entrenched problems,** and are insufficient to fix fundamental issues that lead to them.

Downstream policies in NYC have included:

- **Nutritional policies**, including minimum standards for municipal food, bans on trans-fats, in-school education, and calorie labelling on menus.
- **Anti-hunger policies**, like food programmes for university students, and metrics that measure food insecurity and food assistance service usage.
- **Green infrastructure policies**, including support and training for urban agriculture practitioners, farm-to-fork plans, metrics around urban food production and food wastage, and programmes and incentives to participate.

Addressing causes

Upstream policies can tackle broader, interconnected problems around oppression (e.g. race, class, gender) which impact food, and are core to systemic change. However, these do not happen instantaneously – **they take longer, involve more people and institutions, and require imagination.**

Upstream policies have included:

- **Access policies** for participatory budgeting, improved public transport, local governance spaces around food, food cooperatives, healthcare for low-income and immigrant individuals;
- **Employment and labour protection policies**, including minimum and living wages, affordable health care and paid sick leave, free childcare, affordable rents and housing, job protection for shift, fast food, and grocery workers, anti-racial discrimination policies, and support for food businesses, manufacturers, and worker cooperatives;
- **Education policies**, including improved access to higher education, and increasing active participation in policymaking;
- **Sustenance policies that increase federal food programme benefits and uptake**, free breakfasts and lunches for school children, and improved institutional procurement;
- **Support policies for marginalised and underserved communities and undocumented workers** (e.g. farm workers) to access support, land, permanent residency and ID cards, and establishing metrics that measure labour practices, racial inequalities, and poverty on-farm.

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Policy labs

In combination, upstream and downstream food policies can increase food security for individuals, families, and communities, as well as addressing related issues around sustainability and social and economic equity.

Cities can serve as policy laboratories, exploring and trialling policy where national governments lack political will or are reluctant to engage. Food is one arena ripe for democratic, cross-platform, and innovative localised policy action. **The case of New York City illustrates how a just food system can be fostered through a combination of downstream and upstream food and non-food policies, including labour, education, housing, transportation, green spaces, and waste management.**

However, copy-paste solutions are not always appropriate between cities. It is important for communities, practitioners, and policymakers to talk to each other about ideas, successes, and failures. It is also crucial that cities design context-specific policies, relevant to their location and circumstances, in order to tackle food issues.

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