

# SO WHAT?

POLICY BRIEF N° 14 • FEBRUARY 2021  
www.chaireunesco-adm.com/en



UNESCO Chair in  
World Food  
Systems

The UNESCO Chair in World Food Systems breaks down the barriers of knowledge on food. The **So What?** collection translates the results of research into straightforward conclusions for action.

## Urban food innovations – scaling and social inclusion issues

Olivier Lepiller, University of Montpellier, CIRAD, UMR MoISA, Montpellier, France  
Élodie Valette, University of Montpellier, CIRAD, UMR ART-Dev, Montpellier, France

### KEY POINTS

- The food innovation scaling issue is pivotal in planning more sustainable urban food systems.
- The scaling capacity—the ability to reach a growing number of food consumers—is tightly linked to the way innovations address social inclusion. Innovations may encounter various pitfalls and unwittingly promote exclusionary patterns.
- Two scaling pathways are possible: broadening the original audience or fostering alliances between innovations within a territory, with public authority support essential in all cases.

**J**ust over half of the global population is located in urban areas, while the rate is expected to rise to two-thirds by 2050. Food sustainability issues converge and intensify in cities, where little food is produced. Innovations that promote more sustainable food systems are nevertheless flourishing in urban centres despite the considerable challenges these potential solutions face. As city dwellers' needs are substantial and wide ranging, innovations that aim to contribute to a transition towards greater sustainability cannot overlook the scaling issue.

We propose to approach this issue from the social inclusion standpoint. What is meant by 'social inclusion' and what forms can it take? How do social inclusion objectives mesh with scaling strategies? We will address these questions by considering two innovation examples studied in the URBAL project, i.e. the *La Cagette* cooperative supermarket and the *Ma cantine autrement* (MCA) municipal school catering improvement programme, both based in Montpellier (France).

**Food innovations should address the joint issue of their scaling and social inclusion.**

### Importance of social inclusion

Bouchard *et al.* (2015) view social innovation as “an intervention initiated by social actors to fulfil an aspiration or need, provide a solution or seize an opportunity for action in order to modify social relations, transform a framework for action or propose new cultural orientations. From this perspective [...], social innovation aims to modify the institutional frameworks that shape relationships in society”, which generally involves social transformation based on the introduction of novelty into the established order.



If we consider these urban food innovations as social drivers that bring about change, it is essential to assess their scaling capacity to transform urban food systems.

Innovation scaling implies the enrollment or involvement of a growing number of food consumers. Moore *et al.* (2015) distinguish three different ways of scaling to achieve transformative impact. Scaling up refers to innovation-triggered institutional changes (in legal terms, policy governance, commodity chain structuring, etc.), scaling out signifies the replication of innovations in other settings or roll-out of an innovation to more people; and finally scaling deep refers to transformations in sociocultural norms and values. This approach analyses the scaling process in terms of “increasing the breadth, scope and rooting of innovations” in society.

Scaling may also be tackled from the social inclusion perspective, which is more commonly associated with social justice—generally a key focus of food innovations. The social inclusion injunction is fully warranted by the drive to promote equality and curb exclusion, while also being essential to fulfil the demand in the urban foodscape. Indeed, innovations cannot claim to be sustainable—especially in terms of social justice—if the activities they set up are only available to a minority. The prevailing

industrialized food system is clearly unsustainable, but one of its great virtues is that it ‘feeds the masses’. This system provides low cost food to large numbers of city dwellers and thereby is globally inclusive—even the 5-8 million people in France who rely on food aid benefit from products derived from this system.

This indicates that it would be of interest to reflect on the scaling of urban food innovations on the basis of an analysis of their stance regarding social inclusion and the way they deal with it.

### Different forms of social inclusion

Based on two case studies of the URBAL project, two forms of social inclusion can be considered in terms of the innovation scaling objective.

*La Cagette* cooperative supermarket seeks to “provide access to quality food for all”. The strategy of this supermarket—which is run on a membership basis—is to recruit new members to expand upon the small core group (scaling out).

Meanwhile, the MCA programme aims to increase the sustainability of school catering in Montpellier (France) for all school children. Rather than seeking to boost the number of schoolchildren enrolled in the canteen, the prime focus is to boost the awareness of already enrolled young food consumers on the importance of a more sustainable diet (scaling deep).

The social inclusion oriented scaling strategy differs between these two innovations. For *La Cagette*, the inclusion of vulnerable people is managed by recruiting a larger number of members from the initial core. For MCA, the idea is to influence the values and culture of a so-called captive audience (schoolchildren) which already includes vulnerable people. There are clearcut differences in both the values conveyed by these innovations and the mechanisms that operationalize them.

At *La Cagette*, the drive for social inclusion—to reach a greater number of food consumers—is combined with an explicit concern to include low-income members. The idea of “offering an alternative to supermarkets that is accessible to everyone while combating food inequality” has prompted the inclusion of not only organic and/or local products (often more expensive) on the shelves, but also of lower-end products to attract members with diverse profiles. Members can, for instance, buy 500 g of low-cost spaghetti for €0.57, or organic gluten-free rice flour spaghetti for over €2.50. People with heterogeneous profiles still have to apply for membership, but member enrollment at *La Cagette* is not strategically targeted, it is done on a word-of-mouth basis, thereby leading to a certain degree of social homogeneity.

## METHODS

Based on 14 worldwide case studies, the URBAL project (2018-2022) is developing and testing an approach for monitoring and assessing the impacts of urban food innovations on various sustainability dimensions.

Quantitative impact assessment methods are increasingly common yet generally ineffective in dealing with recent and often small-scale innovations with scant resources available for monitoring and evaluation (time, money, skills).

URBAL proposes an alternative qualitative and participatory form of assessment based mainly on multi-actor workshops during which short-, medium- and long-term changes produced by the innovation are identified. The method is based on the theory of change and the impact pathway assessment approach. URBAL provides a reflective view on: 1) expected/unexpected, positive/negative and proven/potential changes generated by innovations in terms of sustainability; 2) elements that facilitate or hinder these changes; and 3) measurement indicators to be prioritized in quantitative impact assessments.

This method was designed for public and private actors in this field wishing to enhance the sustainability of their initiatives. This tool is designed to help innovators in strategic reflexion on their activities. It also helps donors and public actors make decisions on whether or not to support specific innovations.

For the MCA programme, the challenge is to foster the support of young food consumers. One of the programme initiatives, i.e. organizing an organic bread supply chain to ultimately provision all 84 school canteens in Montpellier, illustrates the difficulty of gaining this support. This sustainability measure appears fairly consensual at first glance yet some parents have criticised the cost of this measure, claiming that priority should instead be given to lowering meal prices. Similarly, some parents feel that the introduction of animal-free menus in canteens is a money saving strategy at the expense of users. They also see it as depriving children of animal proteins, despite the fact that meat is popular and certain groups, particularly people in low-income households, do not necessarily have the opportunity to consume it at home. All children and parents are impacted by these measures but some are doubtful about their benefits. Moreover, the social inclusion target may be undermined by the nondiscriminatory nature of the measures taken since they do not take the sociocultural diversity of the schoolchildren's profiles into account. The measures might sometimes be designed with emphasis on the values of those who best know how to voice their opinions, while overlooking the support needed to facilitate the acceptance of these measures by different audiences. Note nevertheless that an inclusion policy is embodied in the progressive social pricing scheme.

## How can social inclusion be promoted and enhanced?

Social inclusion intentions can thus come up against various pitfalls. In the United States, where a socioethnic community oriented approach is prevalent, the 'whiteness' of innovations has been flagged (Slocum, 2007). Meanwhile, in France, studies have revealed the over-representation of highly educated and quite well-off urban social categories in alternative food settings. Food alternatives are actually often rooted in socioculturally and politically privileged communities. These populations tend to be white and highly educated, while having the means and inclination to buy organic foods and being mindful of nutritional and environmental concerns.

This is also an issue with regard to *La Cagette*. Allowing new members to be recruited spontaneously fosters a social 'amongst peers' atmosphere despite the initial social inclusion thrust. A real intergenerational mix of students, young adults with children and older retired members nevertheless prevails. But the mix falters in terms of educational levels (very high overall), socioprofessional categories (shopkeepers, craftspeople, workers and employees are under-represented), and even ethnicity (although this criterion cannot be legally assessed).

There is another obstacle. The economic model—based on voluntary participation of members in running the supermarket (3 service hours/month)—implies that it functions like a club, i.e. you have to

**Table 1.** Different social inclusion and scaling issues regarding innovations.

	<i>Ma cantine autrement</i>	<i>La Cagette</i>
<b>Objectives</b>	Increasing the sustainability of school catering.	Providing access to good quality food for all.
<b>Targeted scaling</b>	<i>Scaling deep</i> : reconfiguring young food consumers' cultural values.	<i>Scaling out</i> : increasing the number of food consumers.
<b>Audiences</b>	School children enrolled in the canteen.	Members.
<b>Actions</b>	More organic and local products ★ Less animal products ★ Less waste.	Low-end products ★ Single margin at 23%.
<b>Risks</b>	Prioritizing meal quality over cost ★ Underestimating the financial hardship of families ★ Reducing access to nutritional inputs for needy families (e.g. meat and iron sources).	Homogenization of member profiles ('club' effect), discouraging newcomers with different social profiles.
<b>Potential initiatives</b>	Informing and demonstrating that the measures apply at constant cost or equivalent nutritional quality ★ Co-building innovations with beneficiaries through multi-stakeholder working groups.	Duplicating elsewhere, with leaders of different sociological profiles ★ Organizing public events. Developing a side activity with a door open to everyone.

be a member to buy food, which means that members have to check in when they enter the shop. This operating rule can discourage membership and is experienced differently depending on people's social background.

This operational model enables *La Cagette* to avoid getting caught up in the market competition game. It averts the risk of voluntary activities turning into paid work, which would signal the end of the cooperative supermarket model. Sustainability issues are therefore not always mutually consistent. Ensuring economic viability here means limiting social inclusion, although this is one of the fundamental principles of the project.

Voluntary activities are needed to steer free of this 'amongst peers' situation and reach out to people who otherwise would not readily embrace such an innovation: duplicating the innovation in another neighbourhood, with leaders of different social profiles; organizing public events around cooking and food conviviality; or having an ancillary activity open to all.

As part of the MCA programme, the critical reactions of some parents to the actions undertaken highlight the lack of consensus on measures supported by others in the interest of health and environmental sustainability. The programme's universal focus is based on a food model that does not achieve consensus among all users.

These issues suggest that the controversial views of the concerned food consumers should be taken into account in two ways. Firstly, mechanisms need to be set up to help users interpret the measures, e.g. by demonstrating that a measure applies at constant cost or equivalent nutritional quality. Secondly, the innovation should be co-built with the beneficiaries, e.g. through multi-actor working groups, which is more likely to fulfil sustainability criteria in terms of governance. These measures would also help build a genuine food democracy, defined for citizens by fostering access to, participation in and empowerment over their food (Booth and Coveney, 2015). ■

## References

- Booth, S., Coveney, J. (2015) *Food democracy: From consumer to food citizen*. Springer: Singapore, 57 p.
- Bouchard, M. J., Evers, A., Fraisse, L. (2015) Concevoir l'innovation sociale : dans une perspective de transformation. *Sociologies pratiques*, 31(2) : 9-14.
- Moore, M. L., Riddell, D., Vocisano, D. (2015) Scaling out, scaling up, scaling deep: strategies of non-profits in advancing systemic social innovation. *Journal of Corporate Citizenship*, 58: 67-84.
- Slocum, R. (2007) Whiteness, space and alternative food practice. *Geoforum*, 38(3): 520-533.

## TO CONCLUDE

The inclusion of a diverse range of audiences is now a food innovation priority. It is essential to combine social inclusion and scaling so that these innovations will contribute to the transition.

Two pathways are therefore possible: the innovations may be designed to capture new audiences beyond their natural ones by broadening their commitment scope and/or by replicating the innovations in areas with a different sociological make-up; or the innovations may maintain their commitment scope while being allied with innovations from the same place, thereby reaching other audiences.

The scaling issue is particularly complex with regard to innovations. It reveals conflicting elements, i.e. the need to sidestep the 'amongst peers' atmosphere and involve a broader audience, while there is a legitimate concern to retain the original values. For example, in the case of an alliance, it is necessary to be compatible with other innovations which—beyond sharing sustainability objectives—may differ regarding other values.

Finally, innovations require scaling support, especially from local public authorities. Moreover, to manage tensions between inclusive scaling and compliance with original values, tools such as URBAL help inform, while facilitating the participatory governance of innovations.

## Authors

Olivier Lepiller, Sociologist, University of Montpellier, French Agricultural Research Centre for Development (CIRAD), Montpellier Interdisciplinary research centre on Sustainable Agri-food systems (UMR MoISA), Montpellier, France

Élodie Valette, Geographer, University of Montpellier, French Agricultural Research Centre for Development (CIRAD), Actors, Resources and Territories in Development joint research unit (UMR ART-Dev), Montpellier, France



The URBAL project is developing a method for assessing innovation impacts on sustainability. The URBAL project (N° FC 2015/2440 - N° FDNC Ellgt 00063479) is supported by Agropolis Fondation's Thought for Food Initiative (via the Investments of the Future Programme, ANR-10-LABX-0001-01), Fondazione Cariplo and the Daniel and Nina Carasso Foundation.

For further information: [www.urbalfood.org](http://www.urbalfood.org)