

Food in politics

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The public food policies adopted in Brazil, Canada and France – at both national and local levels – offer valuable insights. There is a proliferation of initiatives encouraging new civil society stakeholders to engage in food systems and thus address emerging issues. The challenges of intersectorality and participation remain to be addressed, and new power dynamics need to be imposed.

Consumer practices (Chapter 18), citizen initiatives (Chapter 19) and corporate social and environmental responsibility (Chapter 20) all contribute to the transformation of food systems, but they are not enough; they must be coupled with public policies that enable structural change.

Historically, public policy has focused on two main concerns surrounding food: first, making sure that there are sufficient food supplies to feed the population. This has involved either agricultural policies to increase food production with a view to achieving self-sufficiency or trade policies to resort to cheap food imports from international markets. The second concern has been ensuring the safety and nutritional quality of foods to protect consumers' health.

The other dimensions of food – social, cultural, ethical and environmental – have been relatively absent from public policy debates and agendas but seem to have become legitimate themes again (Fouilleux and Michel, 2022). New food policies that give greater importance to sustainability issues are now being implemented at different scales. They enable the inclusion of new actors striving for change and thus contribute to disrupting often long-standing power dynamics. The challenge is both to pursue cross-cutting policies – breaking with sectoral approaches to food (governed in a rather compartmentalized way by departments or ministries respectively in charge of agriculture, the environment, health, education, the economy, social affairs, culture etc.) – and to ensure complementarity and interaction between the different political scales.

From the scale of urban regions . . .

The end of the twentieth century saw metropolises around the world regain social, political and economic power. Beyond the demographic weight of these metropolises, this rise in power is partly due to states' financial disengagement from urban planning and the transformation of production systems in a globalized world (Brand et al., 2017): globalization has disconnected the largest cities from their national economies and even removed them from their territorial roots. As a result, the food sector represents a tremendous opportunity for cities to re-establish ties – sometimes lost – with their productive and food-supplying environment. But it also offers a chance to reconnect with their past as 'organic cities' prior to the Industrial Revolution, when cities were still literally shaped by food (Steel, 2008). Since the early 1990s, cities have become increasingly interested in how to meet the expectations of city dwellers and improve their food supply. At the territorial level, this trend has involved a proliferation of food relocalization initiatives (Chapter 17).

This profusion of innovations is beginning to be incorporated into food strategies developed by urban local governments (cities, conurbations, metropolises etc.), which have a number of levers for action at their disposal: calls for tenders for collective catering procurement (school canteens, hospitals and other public institutions), the protection of farmland, commercial urban planning and infrastructure management, the establishment of governance frameworks such as local food policy councils, actions in solidarity with the most disadvantaged and similar community-focused measures (Deakin et al., 2016; Dansero et al., 2017; Battersby and Watson, 2018; Cabannes and Marocchino, 2018; Tefft et al., 2020).

The city of Belo Horizonte in Brazil (2.5 million inhabitants) is often considered a pioneer for having developed an integrated policy to fight food insecurity as early as 1993. This strategy, coordinated by a Municipal Secretariat for Food Security and Nutrition, has stood out for its framework for action (spanning from production to consumption), the flexibility of its measures, its attention to urban-rural links and its social justice objective (Rocha and Lessa, 2009). The city has implemented various measures that have subsequently inspired many other municipalities, such as funding subsidized prices at 'people's restaurants' that serve up to 20,000 meals per day, running school canteen programmes in more than 200 schools, supporting grocery shops to sell fruit and vegetables at reduced prices, establishing peasant markets in the city for peri-urban farmers and running food education programmes. This policy, which very quickly achieved results in the

fight against food insecurity, owes its success to several factors: the political will to launch a far-reaching programme; the competence and motivation of a municipal team eager to prove that a public policy to fight poverty could be effective; and last but not least, all this at an estimated cost of 1–2 per cent of the total municipal budget for a target population estimated at nearly 800,000 inhabitants every day (Rocha, 2001).

Urban areas in North America have also been experimenting with food policies – or rather strategies – since the early 1990s (Neuner et al., 2011). The Canadian metropolis of Toronto is particularly emblematic in this regard (Blay-Palmer, 2009). In 1992, it initiated a Food Policy Council as an instrument to promote ‘food democratization’, comprising community activists, politicians, academics, trade unions and agricultural and business representatives (Welsh and MacRae, 1998). These local food councils have since become more widespread and have stimulated local democratic processes (Guthman, 2008; Lang et al., 2009; Starr, 2009). More broadly, urban food policies have also multiplied around the world, including in Mexico City, Medellín (Colombia), Rosario (Argentina), Gampaha (Sri Lanka), Nairobi (Kenya) and Accra (Ghana), among many other examples.

In 2015, the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact was signed. It now counts 211 signatory municipalities around the world, which have voluntarily committed ‘to develop[ing] sustainable food systems [...] that provide healthy and affordable food to all people’, through the adoption of actions in the areas of governance, social equity, support for food production, food procurement, the fight against waste and related sustainability initiatives. This international networking of urban food movements opens up opportunities for exchange and, above all, strengthens the legitimacy of these actions at the local level.

The urban food policies implemented, however, are often still fragmented and address only one of the multiple facets of food systems or do not seek to explicitly impact the food system at other scales (Hodgson, 2012). Food-related activities present a challenge for urban governments, as they need to include representatives from different segments of society (citizens, businesses, academia, public authorities), different levels of governance (from local to international) and different public policy sectors (agriculture, social affairs, health, education, environmental affairs, urban planning etc.). What is more, national or regional policies may limit or even conflict with a municipal authority’s actions. For example, in late 2020, the French Council of State refused mayors the right to issue ‘anti-pesticide’ decrees. Effective mechanisms to ensure the engagement of multiple sectors and actors are also often lacking (De Cunto et al., 2017).

More specifically, the comparative analysis of a large number of urban food policy documents reveals several points (Sonnino et al., 2019; Candel, 2020):

- The objectives set are highly similar, with a few particular themes appearing most often: farming and local production, education and economic development. Crucially missing is climate change mitigation.
- There is little use of regulatory instruments and a lack of clear implementation targets with deadlines.
- There is a ‘missing middle’, that is, a lack of objectives surrounding processing and distribution and of integration of the actors from these sectors. Activities are mostly regulated at the regional, national and international levels.

This last point shows that there is little integration, in cities’ food strategies, of the spaces outside the territories that feed them. This can cause cities to lose sight of broader systemic issues and reveals that, through their strategies, they are in fact acting only on a small part of their food system. Hence, investing in a better understanding of the food flows that intersect in cities allows the latter to grasp how they fit into a wider food system, the issues this raises and what they can do to address them (Gaspard, 2020).

Finally, regarding governance, a comparative analysis of food policy dynamics in Toronto and Brussels has highlighted the need for the actors involved to demonstrate reflexivity (Manganelli, 2020), that is, the capacity to readjust over time, reinvent themselves or reformulate objectives and revise actions in order to adapt to inevitable changes in the local socio-economic and institutional environment (elections, administrative changes etc.). It also seems important to document successes and not to take the legitimacy of local food action for granted.

... to the national and regional scales

The case of Brazil is emblematic of a national food policy that has drawn on local experiences and has fuelled them in turn. The longevity of the aforementioned food security programmes carried out in Belo Horizonte was significantly aided by a factor that played out at the national level. When President Lula da Silva was elected in 2003, he immediately made the main objective of his presidency to eliminate hunger in Brazil and, to this end, to form a National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (CONSEA) bringing together different stakeholders of the food systems. This operation was a success: in 2014, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) declared that Brazil was no longer

on the 'Hunger Map', with less than 5 per cent of the population considered undernourished.

The national 'Zero Hunger' strategy developed under the Lula government in 2004 replicated many of the programmes developed in Belo Horizonte ten years earlier and allocated resources to local food security initiatives. In turn, the Zero Hunger strategy played a very important role in the continuation and growth of the programmes in Belo Horizonte: after 2004, in partnership with the federal government, the city was able to increase the number of 'people's restaurants', expand its food bank and improve its school meal programme. Thanks to the federal Food Acquisition Programme (PAA), the city was also incentivized to buy produce for its restaurants and food bank directly from small family farmers. Finally, the legislation passed as part of the National School Feeding Programme (PNAE) required that 30 per cent of federal funds be earmarked for the purchase of food produced by family farms (Rocha et al., 2012).

Similarly, in Canada, metropolitan-level initiatives launched from the 1990s onwards ultimately stimulated a national drive to establish a 'Food Policy for Canada'. The overarching vision of this policy, adopted in 2019 with a five-year investment budget of CAD134 million, is that 'all people in Canada are able to access a sufficient amount of safe, nutritious, and culturally diverse food and that Canada's food system is resilient and innovative, sustains [the country's] environment and supports [its] economy'. Priority areas for action include support for local authorities, the 'Buy Canadian Promotion Campaign', food security in First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities and combating food waste. This policy was particularly informed by public consultations conducted in 2017 with many stakeholders in the Canadian food system and is supported by a Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council (Levkoe and Wilson, 2019).

In France, the 2014 Law for the Future of Agriculture promoted the launch of territorial food projects (*projets alimentaires territoriaux*, PAT) to develop the 'joint assessment of local agricultural production and food needs in a living or consumption area'. In practice, the vast majority of PAT are led by urban local authorities. This impetus from the state, without dedicated funding, initiated a vast movement of local farming and food initiatives. It has been reinforced by the 2018 Egalim Law's target for sustainable and quality products to account for 50 per cent of state procurement – with organic products to make up 20 per cent of school catering supply – along with relatively significant funding dedicated to PAT as part of France's 2020–1 National Recovery and Resilience Plan.

Admittedly, these innovations – which are mainly focused on promoting better market gardening practices, developing short supply chains, preserving

farmland and supplying collective catering or food solidarity initiatives with local food – account for only a small part of our daily diet. As such, they do not fully challenge conventional food systems. Nevertheless, PAT open up the possibility of new types of food-based partnerships within a territory between actors that previously did not typically work together or did not have the opportunity to do so, for instance, between chambers of agriculture, urban local authorities and actors involved in social work. These relationships proved particularly valuable and effective for responding to emergency situations of high food insecurity during the periods of lockdown associated with the COVID-19 epidemic (France Urbaine, 2020).

In France, this decentralization of food policies contrasts with more centralized public policies developed in silos. From the early twentieth century, food policies focused on regulating food safety, labelling and other signs of food product quality. The core concern was building confidence in the food being sold, purchased and consumed. From the 2000s, successive National Nutrition and Health Programs (*Programmes nationaux nutrition santé*, PNNS) were then set up, steered by the Ministry of Health. These marked the advent of the ‘nutritionalization’ of food policies (Chapter 9). Meanwhile, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food retained control of a National Food Plan (*Plan national pour l'alimentation*, PNA), itself linked to the PNNS (Fouilleux and Michel, 2022). Finally, the COVID-19 crisis and the ensuing rise in poverty have accelerated the review of food insecurity policy, with the establishment of a National Coordination Committee for the Fight against Food Precarity (*Comité national de coordination de la lutte contre la précarité alimentaire*, Cocolupa) and a new roadmap signalling a move away from a response exclusively based on food aid, and to recognize that food has a social and cultural dimension and is not limited to meeting nutritional needs (Chapter 15).

At the European level, national agricultural policies are primarily dictated by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which has an annual budget of almost €60 billion and aims to help farmers weather the risks of agricultural commodity markets and stabilize their income. The CAP ensures the regional coherence of the European internal market and protects it from potential social and environmental dumping by international competition. Successive reforms to ‘green’ the CAP – that is, to make aid to farmers conditional on more environmentally friendly agricultural practices – have always been disappointing. The CAP, which is highly focused on production and trade, largely escapes public debate as private citizens tend to be unfamiliar with this highly complex technical policy. It is governed by forms of regulation or decision-making processes in which industry

representatives carry considerable weight and defend the status quo to avoid losing the financial support that their industries have enjoyed for many years, namely the ‘agricultural profession’ – through its majority unions – the upstream agricultural industries (suppliers of inputs such as seeds, agricultural equipment and phytosanitary products) and food processing players (Fouilleux and Michel, 2022). This situation contributes to locking in and, in a way, institutionalizing the different sociotechnical dimensions of an agroindustrialized food system (De Schutter, 2017).

Food policy as a combat sport

To make food a political object that can be appropriated by citizens on a European scale, a number of civil society actors (NGOs, think tanks, trade unions, research bodies, consumer associations etc.) have joined forces and formed the EU Food Policy Coalition (EUFPC). This coalition advocates an integrated European food policy to replace the CAP, taking various concerns into account: food sovereignty, climate change, environmental protection, social justice and international solidarity, and animal welfare. The coalition carries out lobbying and advocacy work in Brussels to put new issues on the agenda of CAP negotiations and to ensure that proposals arising from the European Parliament are properly addressed in the decision-making process. The coalition’s positions are particularly informed by a report from the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food, 2019), *Towards a Common Food Policy for the European Union: The policy Reform and Realignment That Is Required to Build Sustainable Food Systems in Europe*. Territorial and especially urban food policies – which make far more room for consumer concerns than agricultural policies – inspired the proposals for this European policy.

Another way to change the balance of power between food system stakeholders would be to foster the rise of local and regional authorities’ influence on the decision-making processes that affect them (such as those surrounding the CAP), but in which they still have little to no representation. In this respect, it is interesting to observe the evolution of national and international networks of local authorities such as Terres en ville, France Urbaine, Organic Cities Network Europe, the signatory cities of the Milan Pact, the members of the Local Governments for Sustainability network (ICLEI) and the network of cities committed to climate action (C40). These collectives, which initially very much focused on sharing experiences, are beginning to develop advocacy work in

order to carry more weight in national or international bodies, where policies that exceed the scale of the territories but greatly impact them are discussed and developed.

A 2045 food system transformation forecast scenario calls on civil society to ‘take up the torch’ to prevent a ‘business as usual’ scenario (IPES-Food and ETC Group, 2021). To do so, civil society, organized as a ‘visionary movement’, must develop deeper, broader and more effective collaborations than ever before. This scenario involves four interdependent paths:

- Rooting food systems in diversity, agroecology and human rights;
- Transforming governance structures;
- Shifting financial flows (redirecting R&D and technical budget lines, reforming major commodity subsidies, levying junk food and taxing corporations fairly); and
- Rethinking the modalities of civil society collaboration.

The report, however, highlights certain difficulties involved in establishing such a ‘visionary movement’: the victories achieved risk being only temporary or potentially being reappropriated by other actors or insufficient in the face of the key challenges ahead (climate change, loss of biodiversity, decline in soil fertility).

On a perhaps less ambitious scale, civil society or citizens themselves are already taking action by experimenting with or inventing new processes. In France, the National Food Conferences (*États généraux de l'alimentation*, EGA), launched in 2000 by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin and then in 2017 by President Emmanuel Macron, have brought together all stakeholders concerned with agricultural and food issues and given citizens a voice through public consultations. At the territorial level, participatory workshops open to citizens and digital consultations have also been organized to contribute to the development of territorial food policies. For example, the Occitanie region launched its first digital consultation in 2018, with the participation of 55,000 inhabitants and the organization of fourteen public meetings in different locations to identify actions to be taken. The analysis of this consultation helped to build the ‘*Pacte régional pour une alimentation durable en Occitanie*’ (regional pact for sustainable food in Occitanie), the main lines of which were put to a vote through a second digital consultation that received 45,000 submissions.

While such consultations do involve citizens in the reflection process, most of the people who take part are ‘informed’ citizens. In order to better take into account everyone’s opinions, the citizens’ conventions model, based on random

selection, was implemented on a national scale in 2019 for a climate consultation and in 2020 for the national strategic plan for the future Common Agricultural Policy (*Plan stratégique national de la future politique agricole commune*, PSN-PAC) (CNDP, 2021). The latter debate reached over 1.8 million people and gave rise to over 1,000 proposals. Such conventions have also been carried out at territorial level, for instance, in Paris in 2021, to develop the city's sustainable food policy. These consultations have clearly revealed the discrepancy between the proposals made by citizens and the policies implemented to date (Cholet, 2021). Furthermore, some of the policies that have resulted from these conventions, such as the Egalim Law following the EGAs, the Climate and Resilience Law based on the Citizens' Climate Convention, and the PSN-PAC, have been deemed disappointing by civil society, revealing the considerable influence of lobbies in maintaining the status quo or pushing for a slow transition in spite of environmental emergencies.

These new forms of citizen expression have nevertheless legitimized the general population's desire for a rapid and ambitious transformation of food systems. One can posit that the dominant players in these systems will not be able to remain indifferent to this aspiration for very long. These forms of expression have helped to pave the way for new forms of food democracy which could lead to the implementation, for example, of a food social security system (see Box 22.1).

Box 22.1 For a food social security system

Dominique Paturel

Guided by the concept of 'food democracy' (Paturel and Ndiaye, 2020), one can note the gross inequality in access to freely chosen food and to healthier food. The characteristics of these inequalities of access are trivialized in mainstream discourse and conceal class dynamics. They become visible if we take a step aside and adopt the perspective of 'eaters', a position that we all share. Furthermore, social and health policies generalize these inequalities by designating a population as 'vulnerable' and providing targeted assistance. The approach is underpinned by a liberal conception of solidarity based on a neo-paternalistic approach.

A response based on the social protection model offers an interesting avenue to enable all inhabitants of France to regain control of the food system(s) and to be in a position to do so. The answer cannot come from 'informed'

or activist citizens alone. The model of a general social security system (for health) appears to provide the right framework for a way forward.

Food social security is founded on two pillars:

- Effective social democracy, of which the right to sustainable food is the cornerstone. A form of organization based on the deployment of local sustainable food funds must be considered as part of the re-examination of traditional forms of democracy (particularly representative democracy);
- An economic democracy in which social contributions and agreements with food system actors play a central role. This calls for mobilizing all existing public policy tools relating to food access (collective catering, the various government food plans, the creation of an allowance for the entire population to access fresh produce based on the family allowance model etc.) as part of this systemic policy approach.

Food social security must therefore draw on all these variables to establish its legitimacy. This will allow it to become a major tool for activating the food transition and transformation and for reducing the contribution of food to climate change issues.

Conclusion

The challenge, to transform food systems, is no longer to raise awareness and convince people that the situation is getting worse. Climate change, the collapse of biodiversity, rising poverty and food insecurity, the explosion of inequalities and the monopolization of wealth by an ever smaller fringe of the population are all glaringly obvious. The system that has produced this situation is in the hands of actors who have built their wealth and power on it and are keen to maintain their positions, as demonstrated by the successive failures of debates on agricultural policies, particularly the CAP. This is therefore now well and truly a matter of restoring a balance of power.

Many citizen initiatives, corporate strategies and policy measures to accelerate the transformation of food systems are currently being identified and tested. The associated demands are largely driven by civil society organizations as well as by 'informed' and activist citizens. The results of the Citizens' Conventions show that, provided citizens can inform themselves and engage in debate, their proposals also call for ambitious change. Local authorities tackling these issues are likewise allies. Food has once again become an eminently political issue. Just as well.

This chapter partly draws on the books *Designing Urban Food Policies* (Brand et al., 2019) and *Quand l'alimentation se fait politique(s)* (Fouilleux and Michel, 2022). The authors would like to thank Mathilde Coudray and Mathilde Douillet for proofreading this chapter and for their suggested improvements.

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