

Food policy councils

TOWARDS DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE OF FOOD SYSTEMS?

In the face of globalisation and the vertical integration of links in the food chain by the giants of the agro-food industry, new initiatives abound for relocating and transforming the governance of our food systems. At the heart of this movement, we find Food Policy Councils. These include multi-actor bodies and platforms whose objectives are to identify and offer innovative and interdisciplinary solutions with a view towards improving food systems at the local or territorial level, ensuring that they will be more environmentally sustainable and socially just. This note aims to explain the context that gave rise to these initiatives as well as their principal characteristics in order to highlight their potential and the challenges that they must confront to become a truly participatory instrument for the promotion of the right to food and nutrition.





ORIGIN AND OBJECTIVES OF THE FOOD POLICY COUNCIL

The Food Policy Council represents a model of collaborative governance that emerged during the 1980s in North America¹, and that has since expanded to different parts of the world.

It seeks to democratise food system governance, favouring the participation of different actors within the food system (public sector, producer representatives, private sector, social activists) and developing a holistic vision for meeting challenges at the local or territorial level².

For decades, environmental, social and economic problems tied to food have been understood in a fragmented manner and managed by a multitude of institutions and public services at the local, regional and national level. This generally leads to a proliferation of sectoral policies³, without a real connection between them, which prevents them from having a strategic and coordinated approach for solving food system problems and fulfilling the right to food and nutrition. This fragmentation is particularly significant in Belgium in light of the proliferation of levels of power (federal, regional, community, provincial, local)⁴.

In light of this constant fragmentation, the Food Policy Council allows for the development of a more holistic and interdisciplinary approach by bringing different and complementary expertise to the table. In doing so, it makes collaborative governance a reality, manifested by the active participation of different actors in the political process⁵.

Food Policy Councils operate in two complementary fields. On the one hand, they allow for a relocalisation of food systems locally-based on territories and the inclusion of the food-sovereignty paradigm found in local development policies⁶. On the other hand, they promote the development of 'human rights cities': city or local government coupled with civil-society engagement fosters the protection and promotion of human rights, including those in the realm of the right to food⁷.

1 For a brief history of the FPC, see: Fox, C. (2010), Food Policy Councils: Innovations in Democratic Governance for A Sustainable and Equitable Food System, UCLA Urban Planning development, p.11.

2 The term 'territorial' refers to food systems based within a determined territory. This could be a locality, a town, a city, or a region. It is opposed to the virtual notion of an 'international market'. The term 'relocalisation' of food systems is also frequently used.

3 Policies concerning public health and prevention, poverty and social assistance, agriculture, food chain safety, the fight against waste, energy, the environment, town and county planning, rural development, etc.

4 For example, agricultural policy is shared between the federal and regional levels. Thus, we end up with a federal minister of agriculture and 3 regional ministers whose competencies are not clearly defined. Public health policy is equally broken up between the federal and community levels, which are principally responsible for the promotion of health.

5 For a case study of collaborative governance within a Food Policy Council, see: Koski, C., Siddiki, S., Sadiq, A. A. et Carboni, J. (2016), Representation in Collaborative Governance A Case Study of a Food Policy Council, The American Review of Public Administration, 0275074016678683.

6 For a practical proposal of the integration of food sovereignty into public policy according to five approaches (natural property, energy, local food systems, women's rights and autonomy and community organisation), based on the experiences of the Spanish Basque Country, see: Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa et Gobierno Vasco (2015), 'Sembrando soberanías para otros modelos de vida en Euskal Herria'.

7 The concept of 'Human rights cities' based on 'the recognition of cities as key actors in the protection and promotion of human rights and generally refers to a city where the local government and the local population are morally and legally ruled by human rights principles' (UN Human Rights Council (2015), Research-based report on the role of local government in the promotion and protection of human rights, report prepared by Hoda Elsadda, Rapporteur for the drafting group on local governments and human rights, p.11).



1. FOOD POLICY COUNCIL CHARACTERISTICS

The Food Policy Council is characterised by its wide diversity. It takes several forms and has several different objectives depending on the context where it arises and the intentions of the creators.

Level of governance

They can be instituted at different levels of government, whether at the local or community level or higher territorial levels (large cities, regions). In Belgium, we see the emergence of these Councils at the urban level (Brussels, Gand, Bruges, Liège), particularly in the context of their commitment to the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (see the text box). Food Policy Councils instituted at the national level also exist (see the text box about the Brazilian National Council for Food and Nutritional Security). One interesting solution would be to have councils at different levels of government, on the condition that the roles ought to be well defined and that meaningful interaction between them and public authorities ought to be possible.

The Milan Urban Food Policy Pact

Signed in October 2015, the Milan Pact is an initiative driven by representatives of local communities around the world for fighting for more equitable, resilient and sustainable territorial food systems. As of September 2017, it counts 148 cities as signatories, including Brussels, Bruges, Gand and, most recently, Liège. The Milan Pact reaffirms the roles and responsibilities of local communities in the realisation of food and nutritional rights and focuses on the areas of governance, social and economic equality, sustainable diets and nutrition, production, supply and distribution, and food loss and waste. The Milan Pact particularly encourages direct participation between civil society and small producers in decision making across Food Policy Councils.

The National Council for Food and Nutritional Security (CONSEA)

In 2003, Brazil undertook a strategy of 'Zero Hunger' (fome zero). This strategy, supported by organic law, aimed to guarantee and protect the right to food and nutrition and to create formal spaces for social participation by means of food and nutritional security councils (CONSEA). The national CONSEA was installed within the Presidency of the Republic in order to show the political priority given to the fight against hunger and to promote an intersectoral dialogue between different government departments, reflecting the diversity of social sectors. The CONSEA is composed of a majority of two tiers representing civil society and one tier representing various government sectors. Some decentralised CONSEA have also been instituted with the Federated states and at the municipal level. The CONSEA have been decisive in the adoption and implementation of programs against hunger such as the Food Acquisition Program for family farmers, the National School Meal Program or the Family Allowance program (Bolsa familia), permitting a transfer of wealth to the poorest families.



Composition

Food Policy Councils can be made up of representatives and participants from different food system sectors: production, consumption, processing, distribution and recycling. The participation quotas must be adapted accounting for power relations between the different actors connected to the food system, such as the advocates in the fight against hunger and food justice, educators, non-profit organisations, concerned citizens, civil servants, farmers, groceries, workers' representatives, employer organisations, food processors and food product distributors⁸.

Statutes and financing

Food Policy Councils can configure themselves under different judicial statutes and have a relatively close connection to public authorities: some are real government agencies; others have been created according to government initiatives but function with complete independence, while others still are created autonomously by civil society. As for their financing, many have no financing at all and survive thanks to the energy of volunteers, while others are financed by public funds or by individual donations.

Principal functions

Despite the Food Policy Councils' wide variety of experiences, it is possible to identify four principal functions. (1) They serve as forums for discussing questions concerning food, creating spaces for dialogue where different actors connected to food participate. (2) They encourage coordination between different sectors connected to food, production, and recycling. (3) They issue recommendations in order to influence public policy and undertake follow-up work and monitoring of the implementation of public policies. (4) Besides furnishing strategic advice, they are often behind concrete initiatives that respond to local needs⁹.

If these four functions are realised in a participatory manner by all concerned actors and take power relations into account, they then have the potential to democratise several aspects of the local food systems in many respects¹⁰. In effect, Food Policy Councils can influence national and local political debates by raising awareness of civil society issues, rendering policies devoted to local food accessible to the general public, and in particular sensitising the general public to food system issues and furnishing a platform for citizens to become involved. They also favour the interlinking of several sectors that do not otherwise work together. A successful fight against obesity and malnutrition requires, for example, a concerted effort involving social actors, public health partners, as well as food producers and distributors. The actions of the Food Policy Councils have the potential to stimulate local economies and combat poverty by supporting local agriculture, creating new local markets or proposing means to access quality food for people of all socio-cultural backgrounds.

8 Harper, A., Shattuck, A., Holt-Giménez, E., Alkon, A. and Lambrick, F. (2009), Food policy councils: Lessons learned, Institute for food and development policy, 1-63.

9 Harper et al. (2009), op. cit. n.3.

10 The following four possibilities come from a study conducted by Food First and the Community Food Security Coalition aiming to evaluate the Food Policy Council's thirty years of experience in North America. For more information, see: Harper et al. (2009), op. cit. n.3.





2. **CURRENT AND FUTURE CHALLENGES**

This overview will show that Food Policy Councils have a high potential to transform food systems. However, in light of recent experiences and ongoing experimentation, they must and should confront several challenges.

Representation and democratic participation

Selection methods (possibly based on elections) must allow for the assurance of fair representation of different food actors, and deliberation and decision methods must guarantee respect for fundamental rights. An approach based on human rights specifically requires guaranteeing the participation of marginalised groups (small producers, at-risk people, women's groups, etc.).

Independence vis-à-vis public authorities

Food Policy Councils must allow for the harnessing of local citizens' innovative spirit without having it be controlled and absorbed by institutions. In accordance with the theory of self-determination, if innovation comes 'from the bottom up' and is subsequently owned by the actors who thought of it, it has a higher probability of being sustainable and resilient. Food Policy Councils are maximised when they are the result of an authentic process of co-creation, including peoples initiatives, and within which all concerned actors succeed in identifying the challenges facing their territory and proposing sustainable solutions.

Making the Councils sustainable

Although public authorities must respect the independence of the Councils, a certain institutionalisation is necessary in order to ensure their longevity. In effect, this requires ensuring that the Councils survive election cycles. The institutionalisation of the Councils must be accompanied by sufficient means to allow them to accomplish their mission. The provision of a Council administrative office is one of the measures that helps ensure a minimum of follow-up.

The private sector's role

Food Policy Groups sometimes open up participation to a non-conventional actor in the fight for the right to food and nutrition: the private sector. Food policy councils, in particular those which have a government mandate, must ensure balanced participation and policy making without conflicts of interest from large corporations or business. Ensuring balanced power dynamics means to also ensure representatives of small agricultural producers or small local businesses in avoiding the influence of the food industry.

Ensuring accountability

Food Policy Councils cannot be confined to a space of dialogue and advice. The implementation of the Councils must be accompanied by mechanisms for accountability on the part of public authorities. Public authorities must consider advice and enforce the Food Policy Council's decisions. In cases where they decide to stray, the decisions must be duly justified and mechanisms for recourse must be implemented. It is also important that the Councils have a role to play in following up on and evaluating programs.

Reinforcing the urban-rural connection

Cities are often a hotbed of citizen initiatives, including in the realm of food policy (urban agriculture, social groceries, food cooperatives, etc.). Certain cities, furthermore, present themselves as pioneers in the development of public policy on sustainable food, like the example of the Milan Pact initiative. It is necessary, however, to avoid segregation between urban and rural policies. 'Current thinking is too restricted in its limited conceptions of the urban space and does not sufficiently take into account the importance of connections and interactions among domains, including rural and suburban zones'¹¹. It is obvious that cities need the countryside to ensure their food needs are met. For their part, rural zones cannot be reduced to an agricultural supply function or a bedroom community. It is important to think about policies reinforcing the connections and interactions between domains, including urban, suburban and rural zones. This dimension should be better integrated into the Food Policy Councils' thinking.

Gent en Garde and the Good Food Strategy

In 2013, the city of Gent launched the Gent en Garde policy and more recently, in 2016, the Brussels-Capital region implemented the Good Food Strategy. Both initiatives define areas of intervention and concrete action, which include the promotion of local products, the reduction of food waste, the raising of citizen awareness and involvement, and the creation of sustainable alliances between territorial actors who work in the food trade¹². The two initiatives plan to set up Food Policy Councils. It is a unique opportunity to implement a participatory strategy for the realisation of food rights in Belgium.



¹¹ Forster, T. and Mattheisen, E. (2016), Territorial Food Systems: Protecting the rural and localizing human rights accountability, Right to Food and Nutrition Watch.

¹² For more information: <https://gentengarde.stad.gent> and <http://www.goodfood.brussels>.



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