

DEMETRA

Democratic Governance, Environmental and Climate Challenges,
and Societal Transformation: Deliberation, Inclusiveness, and
Citizen Empowerment for Sustainable Food Systems

Beyond Pilots: Building Durable Governance Frameworks for Urban Food Systems

Policy Brief No. 2

Good food projects are starting in cities across Europe, but they often fall apart because no one person or agency is clearly in charge, funding runs out, and progress stops when politicians change. This brief explains why these initiatives struggle and offers five practical steps to fix this, including recognizing local experts as key advisers, setting up permanent food councils, and providing stable funding for years, not just months.

For city policymakers, food administrators, and community workers who want to turn temporary projects into lasting institutions.

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The challenge

The pressure on policymakers. Governments must deliver ambitious sustainability transformations in response to the climate crisis, while keeping them fair, democratic, and broadly supported. Food systems are at the heart of this: they drive greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss, and health inequalities, while recent crises (from COVID-19 to geopolitical shocks) have exposed deep vulnerabilities.

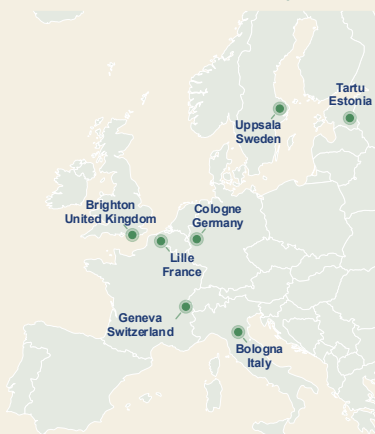
What we examine. We map how food policy is actually made across the seven project cities, and which governance arrangements enable or constrain deliberative, inclusive, and effective action on sustainable food systems. Cities are key laboratories for food policy innovation, yet many urban food initiatives remain fragile because competencies, institutions, and funding are often weakly formalised. The seven project cities are Brighton (UK), Cologne (Germany), Bologna (Italy), Lille (France), Geneva (Switzerland), Uppsala (Sweden), and Tartu (Estonia).

Three questions we address

- 1. How food policy is made.** Across the seven cities, who holds responsibility for food policy, and how are decisions actually taken?
- 2. What makes initiatives last.** Which governance arrangements let deliberative, inclusive food initiatives take root and endure?
- 3. Why initiatives stay fragile.** Why do promising urban food initiatives remain vulnerable, and how can they be scaled and sustained?

Policy brief aimed at policymakers, their administration, and practitioners.

Seven cities · seven countries · seven food systems



Five recommendations at a glance

Drawing on our findings, we set out five priority actions for building durable, participatory urban food policy governance. Each is explained in full on the next page.

WHO IS IN CHARGE

1 Source and integrate local knowledge

Integrate existing know-how by creating formal advisory roles.

WHAT PAYS FOR IT

3 Build stable, long-term funding

Replace reliance on short pilots with durable, multi-year funding.

WHAT OUTLASTS POLITICS

5 Sustain innovation for the long term

Create governance tools that outlast political cycles.

2 Institutionalise participatory governance

Move from episodic participation to durable democratic infrastructure.

4 Shift from targets to systemic change

Rebalance funding towards long-term investment, supporting integrated governance frameworks.

Political turnover creates fragility. Many initiatives are highly vulnerable to changes in political leadership, losing momentum and knowledge when priorities or key personnel shift.

The main barrier is rarely a lack of ideas, but a lack of institutional durability.

Numbering matches the detailed recommendations on the following page.

The recommendations in detail

1. Source and integrate local knowledge.

Local actors, civil society organisations, and practitioners hold essential know-how.

Integrate this expertise systematically into policymaking by creating formal advisory roles for local actors, civil society organisations and practitioners so that their expertise is integrated into agenda-setting, implementation and evaluation.

2. Institutionalise participatory governance.

Move from episodic participation to durable democratic infrastructure such as food policy councils, standing citizen panels, and co-design platforms, with clear mandates, decision pathways, and feedback obligations, and adequate resourcing so inclusion is feasible rather than symbolic.

3. Build stable, long-term funding.

Replace reliance on short pilots with durable, multi-year funding for staff capacity, coordination, and partnerships with civil society, reducing competition-only dynamics that undermine continuity and trust.

4. Shift from targets to systemic change.

Rebalance funding from narrow outputs towards long-term investment in resilience and structural change, supporting integrated governance frameworks that connect food, public health, climate action, procurement, land use and social policy.

5. Sustain innovation for the long term.

Create safe-to-learn environments with stable staffing, knowledge retention, and mechanisms for diffusion across cities, and governance tools that outlast political cycles.



Together, these actions would help cities turn promising food initiatives into durable, participatory governance; the main barrier is rarely a lack of ideas, but a lack of institutional durability.

The underlying evidence

These recommendations draw on our comparative analysis of how food policy is made across the seven DEMETRA cities.

Formalisation is limited. Responsibility for food policy is often informal or dispersed, leaving initiatives without a stable institutional home, clear mandate, or lasting competencies.

Collaboration lacks permanence. Cross-sector and multi-stakeholder collaboration is rising, but it often depends on committed individuals and short projects rather than durable structures.

Cities are innovation hubs. Urban authorities are testing integrated approaches that link food to health, climate, procurement, and social policy, showing what joined-up governance can achieve.

Instruments are often too narrow. Available policy instruments are frequently inadequate or narrowly framed, and persistent policy silos limit cities' capacity to drive systemic, cross-sector change.

Political turnover creates fragility. Many initiatives are highly vulnerable to changes in political leadership, losing momentum and knowledge when priorities or key personnel shift.

Multilevel governance cuts both ways. Higher levels of government can enable or constrain local action; outcomes depend on how competencies, funding, and vertical and horizontal coordination are aligned.

COMPARATIVE URBAN FOOD POLICY ANALYSIS

7

cities in seven
European countries

120

interviews with
policymakers

17-18

interviews in
each city



Image: Valentin Rotstein / UWI

Find out more

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