



Experimenting with urban food governance. Ambitions, limits, directions, problems, trajectories

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1. Introduction

Between 19 and 22 June, the 11th AESOP Sustainable Food Planning Conference 'Building Movement, Achieving Transformation' was held in Brussels and Ghent. The conference provided a valuable opportunity for geographers, planners and public policy analysts to gain insight into the potential for movements to incorporate and champion sustainable food planning, as well as the capacity of communities to propose alternative food strategies. Within the conference, the authors of the paper had the pleasure of chairing a thematic session dedicated to 'innovative governance and policy frameworks'. The following contribution aims to provide a compendium of what emerged from the thematic session to offer new insights for future research.

2. Urban Food Governance as an experiment

Nowadays, urban experiments are increasingly populating the world of food systems' governance and planning. From grassroots-driven guerrilla gardening, to urban agriculture and Nature-based Solutions' pilots, to Urban (Food) Living Laboratories, we could argue that food systems' planning is largely turning “experimental” (Brons et al., 2022). In fact, often promoted by local, national, and European funding frameworks, initiati-

ves such as Urban Living Laboratories, co-creative partnerships and the like, have been addressing different sections of the food system with the idea of foregrounding and diffusing (social) innovations. From a governance perspective, by creating targeted frameworks for action, such experiments are deemed as more effective than established institutional structures in innovating food governance and accelerating food planning processes (Fuenfschilling et al., 2019; Gamache et al., 2020).

Yet, putting the (socially) innovative and transformative character of experiments into question, we argue that “urban food governance through experiments” holds potential but also faces contradictions. Indeed, on the one hand, experiments can help to forge new collaborations among actors, stirring socially innovative food governance dynamics and integrated food planning approaches (Sonnino and Coulson, 2021). On the other hand, however, experiments often struggle to subvert dominant power structures, remaining “local” and failing to reach out to key policy levels. Nevertheless, some experiments succeed in unleashing their transformative and trans-scalar potential through multi-level governance configurations capable of triggering both horizontal (between public, research, private and civil society actors) and vertical (across different institutional levels and/or non-governmental actors at different scales) collaborations on food-related topics (Bulkeley et al., 2019).

Aiming to explore key tensions and nuances in urban food governance through experiments, our session dealt with the following research topics:

- Critical approaches, both conceptual and empirical, on urban food governance (and planning) as experimental governance within the urgent challenge of food system change;
- Contributions on forms of experimentation and their contradictions in addressing diverse areas of the urban food system (from production to distribution, consumption and disposal) as well as in effecting integrated approaches to food system governance;
- Analyses of European frameworks (e.g. Horizon 2020) and trans-local food policy networks (e.g. the MUFPP) as drivers of experiments and their out-scaling across localities;
- Analyses of urban experiments based on multilevel governance arrangements across different types of institutional and non-institutional actors;
- Contributions that critically address the politically transformative and democratic potentials of food experiments in specific contexts.

Three contributions were presented and discussed:

The first one, proposed by Riccardo Giovanni Bruno and Veronica Allegretti (University of Turin), delivered an in-depth empirical investigation of the "Punto al Cibo" movement in Turin (Italy). This movement has become a prominent actor in the governance of Turin's food system. Punto al Cibo, which may be characterized as a network of networks, represents a dynamic arena to share experiences and co-design new initiatives dedicated to transforming the food system in Turin. The paper deepens the organizational and international dynamics of Punto al Cibo, analyzing its potential on local food policy as well as its impact on the broader food system.

Second, Christian Scholl and Louise Longton from Maastricht University presented a paper which examined the governance dynamics of the transition towards alternative food systems, with a particular focus on the case study of 'La Ceinture Aliment-Terre Liégeoise' (CATL) as an Alternative Food Network (AFN) in Liège (Belgium). Adopting a qualitative research approach, the study aims to elucidate the manner in which governance tensions were addressed during the upscaling process of the CATL. Based on a review of the literature, the paper conceptualizes AFNs as evolving in a hybrid sector, situated between different societal sectors (i.e. the community, public, and market sectors). The findings indicate that the manner in which governance tensions are addressed significantly influences the trajectory of AFNs.

Third, Barbora Alderova and Hannah Pitt from Cardiff University presented an overview on a set of co-designed evaluation initiatives aimed at assessing programs oriented to transform food systems in the United Kingdom. The preliminary takeaways suggest that: evaluation can play a pivotal role in stimulating meaningful reflection functional to strategic planning; evaluation turns out to be an effective instrument for mutual learning; the use of evaluation can support policy makers to make more informed decisions in food system transformation policies.

3. Lesson learned and conclusions

Urban food planning experiments have the potential to transform cities into more sustainable and resilient communities, but their long-term success depends on several key factors.

One of the primary concerns is whether these initiatives can be maintained over time. To ensure the longevity of urban food planning experiments, it is crucial to establish clear governance structures and identify the appropriate entities to manage them. This may involve collaborations between local governments, community organizations, and private stakeholders, with each party playing a defined role in the planning and im-

plementation process.

Securing adequate funding is another essential element for the success and continuity of urban food planning experiments. Cities must explore various funding sources, such as grants, public-private partnerships, and community investments, to ensure that these initiatives have the necessary resources to thrive.

By addressing these key considerations – the potential for long-term sustainability, appropriate governance arrangements, and sufficient funding – urban food planning experiments can become more than just temporary interventions. They can evolve into lasting solutions that transform the way cities produce, distribute, and consume food, ultimately creating more resilient and equitable communities.

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