



## Experimenting with urban food systems. A comparison of Oslo and Turin

Federico Cuomo, Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Turin

Luca Battisti, Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Turin

Riccardo Bruno, Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Turin

Celine Motzfeldt Loades, Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR), Oslo Metropolitan University

Anders Eika, Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR), Oslo Metropolitan University

### 1. Introduction

The importance of experimentation in the urban food system transition is widely recognized both in literature and among policymakers (Brons et al. 2022; Experimental spaces in urban contexts can create the best conditions to make new ideas, technologies and organisational structures emerge and mature for triggering transformation (Leeuwis et al. 2021). Recent literature in geography and public policy has highlighted how urban experimentation is central to creating food systems that are more equitable, accessible, inclusive and sustainable (Sonnino 2023). In fact, cities are seen as privileged spaces for triggering change because they are constantly fermenting services capable of bringing together actors with different experiences, skills and interests around the topic of food (Moragues-Faus and Battersby 2021) .

### 2. The European strategy: Food 2030

The Horizon 2020 project 'FUSILLI' has the objective of formulating shared urban food strategies with the aim of completing the transition to a qual-

ity, sustainable, safe and inclusive food system in twelve cities.

In alignment with the European Commission's food strategy 'Food 2030', FUSILLI is experimenting with innovative policies across five axes of the food chain: production, distribution, consumption, waste management and governance. To promote these initiatives, the cities have created Living Labs, a tool to create and apply research based on the involvement of citizens in designing, formulating, testing and evaluating innovative actions in real-life contexts. In addition to open-air experimentation, FUSILLI intends to build a community of knowledge on the food system, acting both on a local and international scale.

In the broad partnership of cities involved, Oslo and Turin are two cities that have experimented with collaborative governance arrangements. Although the two cities present significant differences in terms of culture and agricultural conditions they are united by having similar population sizes, strong municipal bureaucracies, and advanced service-based economies.

Despite the increasing momentum on experimentalism in urban food systems, the factors that can lead to long-lasting benefit for communities

as well as the implication in terms of governance are scarcely investigated.

Analysing the FUSILLI experimental initiatives and policy scenarios of Oslo and Turin in a comparative perspective, the paper aimed at dealing with the following research question: how do cultural and contextual conditions impact the cities efficacy of using urban food experimentations to foster long-term urban food system transformation?

### 3. Activities in Oslo and Turin

Oslo's UFL is nested within the Agency for Urban Environment. It has consisted of 3 projects, each with its own stakeholder configuration, with limited interaction among the stakeholders of different projects. The UFLs co-creation and innovation happens at this project level, as opposed to the overarching UFL level. At the top level the UFL is akin to a tool for the Agency to forward innovation and collaboration within the city's food system. These three projects are as follows:

1. The Agency rents its offices in a private-owned building with multiple tenants. The UFL collaborates with the landlord, the canteen operator, another municipal agency renting in the same building, and a research institution to implement innovative solutions for sustainable and healthy eating at work.
2. The UFL is working with the Agency of Nursing Homes to pilot internal support services for the kitchens of Oslo's 27 public nursing homes. The project largely focuses on reducing food waste by involving staff in developing sustainable routines.
3. The UFL worked with the Agency for Health and the Education in piloting an internal support service for public kitchens in Oslo's 94 upper secondary schools. They were implementing a new daily free pescatarian school meal, but the municipality ended funding from 2024.

The UFL and the projects only include residents as passive users of the services. They are informed of the projects and the progress, answer surveys et cetera, but are not involved in planning or running the lab or the three projects.

The FUSILLI UFL in Turin focuses on Mirafiori Sud, a peripheral neighbourhood located in the southern part of Turin, adopting the Urban Living Lab approach. Historically a working-class neighbourhood, Mirafiori Sud is now a hub for urban regeneration, leveraging its cultural heritage and abandoned industrial sites.

In Mirafiori Sud, the primary focus concerned the creation of a food hub, where the aim regarded the collection and redistributing of food taken from local suppliers, with the Fondazione Comunità Mirafiori playing a central role. As a partner in the FUSILLI project, the foundation also relied on this initiative to create a territorial network that has evolved into the Community Pact, promoting collaboration among local entities and enhancing food security. Additionally, the UFL in Mirafiori Sud targets circularity, exemplified by the construction of a circular kiosk within Orti Generali, inspired by circular economy principles. This kiosk has hosted workshops with local chefs, promoting sustainable practices and community engagement.

### 4. The connection between UFL and Urban Food Policy (UFP)

Oslo municipality has worked towards food transformation for a decade. This work resulted in September 2023 in an urban food policy with a focus on food consumption contributing to public health, animal welfare and greenhouse gas emissions. Importantly, achieving the ambitions of this policy is left at the Agency for Improvement and Development, not with the Agency of Urban Environment. Within the framework of the hierarchical municipal organisation of Oslo, this severely hinders the impact of the UFL. Understanding the organisational culture of the Oslo bureaucracy

is essential is understanding the failures and successes of the UFL, as exemplified by the relative success of project 1 as compared to project 3 (see above). While the former engages the facility of the same department that leads the UFL, the latter attempts to influence the school system, which is nested in a different department.

In Turin, the implementation of an UFL in the Mirafiori Sud neighbourhood has been a key driver in advancing urban food policies. By relying on the UFL approach, the southern district of the city has transformed into a dynamic hub for food sustainability and circular economy practices. Indeed, the focus does not regard the collection and redistribution of food from local suppliers only; rather, it also promotes community engagement and local collaboration. This has been achieved through the involvement of the Fondazione Comunità Mirafiori, which played a crucial role in establishing a territorial network, evolving into the Community Pact that enhances food security and supports sustainable practices. The project also led to the construction of a circular kiosk within Orti Generali, further embedding circular economy principles into the local food system.

The processes that occurred in Mirafiori Sud were effective demonstrations about how ULLs serve as crucial platforms for trial and implementation of innovative food-related policies. Indeed, by facilitating direct community involvement and fostering partnerships among local stakeholders, the ULL in Turin has effectively shown how localised interventions can influence the urban food system, providing showcases of successful policies to the city's government.

## 5. Challenges and next steps

The Oslo UFL met challenges especially of governance and budgeting. There is no political consensus that the UFL is important in achieving a sustainable urban transition by the goals mentioned above.

Public procurement of sustainable and healthy food is under-prioritised in the City's budget. Lack of shared political visions is especially reflected in free school meals in Oslo's secondary and high schools and in the political goal to reduce meat consumption. Additionally, municipal institutions lack resources and knowledge to facilitate sustainable and healthy meals.

With the change of municipal government in Autumn 2023 and a cut of direct budgets for free school meals, the number of schools offering free school food has been reduced from 94 to 3, the project's ability to promote healthy and sustainable food habits is severely limited.

The challenges of using public procurement in canteens, schools and nursing homes to enable a turn to sustainable and healthy food are affected by consumption patterns, perceptions of food, and food practices in Norwegian culture. Such challenges relate, amongst others, to low demand for sustainable and healthy food in society at large. There is a widespread tendency of consumers to prioritise cheap, industrialised food over locally produced or organic food. The UFL's goal of halving meat consumption by 2025 has been met with broad scepticism.

Although focused more on reducing food waste and the environmental impact of logistics than reducing meat consumption, the management of school canteens also represents a particularly important challenge for the Turin UFL. Since 2016, with the launch of the 'Fresh Canteen' project, the municipality has been experimenting with redefining the public procurement specifications for school canteens to favour decentralised meal preparation, based on site cooking and distribution in schools equipped with kitchens. The project, although slowed down by the COVID-19 emergency, yielded excellent results and led the School Policy Department to extend the experiment to other primary schools in the area, which are attempting to re-plan logistics and enhance the kitchens through ad hoc public-private partnerships.

The attempt to reduce food waste and the environmental impact of logistics for school canteens could become a priority policy objective for the interdepartmental food council, a body created by Fusilli's ULL, which today represents a governance forum capable of coordinating and influencing the sustainable transition of Turin's food system.

Nevertheless, several barriers will have to be resolved by Oslo and Turin in an attempt to support the sustainable transition of the food system by working on public procurement at the local level.

Although the focus on reduced meat consumption is at the fore in Norwegian sustainability discourse, there have been slight effects on meat consumption patterns. Meat consumption has more than doubled in the period of 1959 to 2023 and is still slowly rising, as shown on figure 1 below. The average Norwegian consumption of meat is also significantly higher than the national health authorities' nutritional recommendations, although lower than Italy. Embedded food practices, cultural perceptions of what constitutes a valid nutritional meal and a strong, monopolised food lobby industry, poses significant challenges to the transformation capability of the UFL's goals to enable a sustainable shift in food practices.

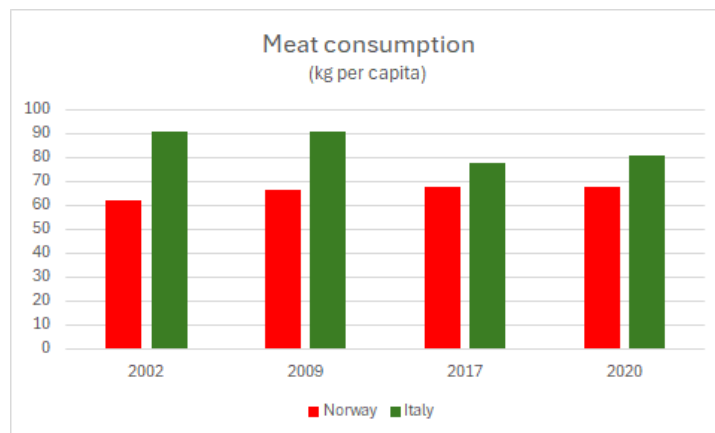


Figure 1 - Meat consumption in Italy and Norway. Data source: wikipedia.com, 2024

In the Italian context, local governments have to deal with burdensome economic constraints and the need to guarantee the right to food for all families. This condition slows down the city's transformative capacity as it reduces the possibility of incentivising, through public procurement, private entities that experiment with short and quality supply chains, low environmental impact menus and on-site preparation of meals that require distribution costs and approvals.

## 6. Conclusions

Despite the cultural and contextual difficulties, the FUSILLI project in Oslo and Turin has demonstrated that experimentation based on the engagement of local communities in trial and implementation can give rise to sustainable solutions. If supported by political and economic investments, these solutions could provide a precious contribution for the sustainable and inclusive urban food system transformation.