Urban food governance in times of crises. Insights from Toronto

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Abstract

This paper explores how phases of crisis and post-crisis affect urban food movements and their governance arrangements. Through the analysis of the Toronto food movement trajectory, this paper shows the effects of disruptive times, by analyzing the socio-political tensions that crises trigger. Doing so, the paper demonstrates how, while socio-economic instabilities, health emergencies, political shifts and similar crisis-factors, destabilize urban food movements, crises can also be breeding ground for social and governance innovations to emerge. Thus, when strategically navigated, crisis-junctures can help to open up new spaces of action and to reposition the role of food in the urban agenda.

Questo articolo tratta l'impatto di periodi di crisi e post-crisi sui movimenti alimentari urbani e sulle loro modalità di governance. Illustrando l'esperienza di Toronto si analizzano in modo particolare le tensioni socio-politiche innescate da situazioni di crisi. In tal modo, l'articolo intende mostrare come, da un lato, fattori quali insicurezza alimentare, povertà, emergenza epidemica, o i cambiamenti nei regimi politici, destabilizzano i movimenti alimentari urbani; dall'altro, invece, le crisi possono anche essere terreno fertile per l'emergere d'innovazioni sociali e di governance. Quindi, se gestite in modo strategico, le crisi possono contribuire ad aprire nuovi spazi d'azione ed a riposizionare il ruolo dei sistemi alimentari nell'agenda urbana.

Parole Chiave/Keywords: *Urban food systems/Sistemi alimentari urbani; urban food governance/governance urbana sul cibo; socio-political tensions/tensioni socio-politiche; Toronto*

1. Introduction

I still recall the emotional words of Lori Stahlbrand – protagonist of the Toronto food movement and former coordinator of the Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) – referring to the contemporary reality of the movement and stating that "the TFPC is fighting for its life. After thirty years, the most prominent and successful food council in the world is fighting for its life in a time where food has never been more important" (conver-sation with Lori Stahlbrand in 2021). In fact, the recent stage of the Toronto food movement shows a reality of disruption and crisis; this reality has ushered profound changes in the urban food governance landscape and visible reconfigurations in food policy-making arrangements (Manganelli, 2022). Yet, it is not the first time that the Toronto food movement faces turbulent periods. On the contrary, we could observe how a phase of socio-economic downturn provoking a food insecurity crisis has marked the very genesis of key food organisations and governing structures around

the 1980s (Stahlbrand & Roberts, 2022). More profoundly, key moments of instability and disruption have occurred all along the Toronto food movement trajectory, provoking tangible effects on food governing arrangements. Beyond the Toronto experience, food movements in general need to navigate uncertain socio-political environments and to cope with the (still) scarce recognition of urban food systems as a legitimate governance field (Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015; Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999). Thus, changes in political regimes bringing about reduced support are also key crisis-factors for urban food movements and their governance institutions.

In light of this background, this paper aims to understand how moments of crisis and post-crisis, affect urban food movements in general and urban food governance arrangements in particular. Such an impact, I assume, goes in different directions. It can for instance trigger shocks and ruptures which can lead to threatening or even dismantling urban food governance arrangements, such as food policy councils, food strategies, or other types of coalitions advancing the cause of food system change. Yet, crises can also give space to socially innovative initiatives, producing innovations in urban food governance (Van den Broeck et al., 2019); this can work towards repositioning the urban food movement within changing socio-economic and socio-political environments (Cattivelli, 2022; Zollet et al., 2021). This repositioning can usher new values, objectives, organizational strategies and governing initiatives, which can even reinforce the role of food for the city (Dansero et al., 2017). While the fragile status of urban food policies, and the challenge of engendering a food system approach within often hostile socio-political environments, are well documented by the urban food governance literature (Sonnino & Coulson, 2021; Sonnino et al., 2019), less researched is the impact of socio-economic, health and political crises as disruptive junctures which destabilize urban food system governance, leading to a variety of possible outcomes and contested food governance trajectories.

To conceptually and empirically illustrate these aspects, this article gives accent to socio-political tensions, and ways to cope with such tensions, as stemming from situations of crisis and disruption. Specifically, socio-political tensions are conditions of threat, instability, or urgency, as they are experienced by actors, organizations and institutions of the urban food governance. Examples are renewed food insecurity concerns due to particular socio-economic downturns; the uncertainties coming along with changes in political climates; or the perceived urgency to remedy situations of inequality and injustice re-accentuated by conditions of crisis (Stone et al., 2024). Ways to cope with tensions refer to particular (governance) strategies, or tactics, put into place by urban food movements´ actors and initiatives as ways to navigate unfriendly environments. Examples can be the building of new organizations, coalitions, or alliances dealing with specific food systems´ urgencies; the establishment of advocacy networks aiming to legitimate a space for food in the city; the re-structuring of local institutions for food systems´ governance. By drawing from insights on urban food governance and social innovation in times of crisis, I argue that observing modalities through which such tensions are experienced and addressed is of particular importance to understand: a) how crisis and post-crisis moments push socially innovative responses; and b) to what extent such responses contribute to redefine social and governance relations, possibly leading to empowering and meaningful socio-institutional change (Moulaert, 2013; Nyseth & Hamdouch, 2019; Van den Broeck et al., 2019).

Empirically, this paper focuses on the Toronto food movement´s trajectory as particularly illustrative of the challenges experienced by urban food movements in navigating crisis and post-crisis moments. On the one hand, Toronto is widely renowned for being a pioneer example of urban food governance, with its long-term trajectory and with rather resilient food governance and policy institutions, such as the TFPC and, later, the Toronto Food Strategy (Blay-Palmer, 2009). Yet, the Toronto food move-

ment has been in constant need to re-negotiate its legitimate space in the city, and to sensitize wider actors and institutions about the role of food system change for key sustainability (and justice) targets. Phases of crisis and disruption have further accentuated these struggles all along the history of the Toronto food movement, up to the contemporary phase.

After a conceptual section that characterizes urban food governance in moments of crisis and post-crisis (section 2) and highlights the role of socio-political tensions in conditioning socially innovative urban food governance (section 2.1), the empirical part of this article (section 3) retraces the trajectory of the Toronto food movement from its origins to the current stage. Particularly, the analysis identifies key junctures of crisis and disruption and shows how tensions stemming from those particular phases feature as decisive moments where the future of the food movement is, to a large extent, pre-figured.

2. Urban food governance in the midst of crises

A common way of looking at crises is in terms of junctural moments of disruption, or cyclical phases of instability, preceded and followed by periods of relative stabilization. While exogenous factors, such as specific events, shifts, catastrophes can trigger phases of destabilization, crises are also endogenous to the ways in which food systems as well as wider economic or societal systems (at least, in capitalist economies) are organized (O'Conner, 1981). Adopting a word food systems approach, for instance, food regime theorists have analysed crises as intrinsically linked to the "relations within which food is produced, and through which capitalism is produced and reproduced" (McMichael, 2009, p. 281). According to this view, the internal contradictions of the corporate food regime – based on fossil fuel-dependent industrialized production, financial speculation, concentration and centralization of agribusinesses, global trade arrangements – make dominant food systems prone to cyclical phases

of crisis, as much as capitalist systems are in general (Friedmann, 2005; McMichael, 2009). Referring more specifically to the realm of urban food planning, in their pioneer contribution, Morgan and Sonnino (2010) argue how crucial crisis´ factors have pushed "a new food equation" which calls urban actors to take food system governance and planning into serious account. Among these crisis factors, as the authors elaborate, is the food price surge of 2007–2008, causing riots and protests around the world and revamping food insecurity concerns at different scales.

While the interconnection of food systems with crises and instabilities is unequivocal, we could observe how, nowadays, the quality and frequency of crises, as well as the diffused perception of urgency and uncertainty, have assumed a peculiar connotation. In short, crises and instabilities surround us, becoming more frequent and pervasive in time and space, and having critical repercussions on food systems as much as on the everyday life of citizens and people (Manganelli, 2022). In particular, socio-economic and financial downturns affecting contemporary societies reinforce pre-existing conditions of vulnerability, food insecurity and poverty, particularly affecting the most disadvantaged communities. Similarly, health and epidemic emergencies, such as the recent wave of the Covid-19, have reawakened food security and food justice concerns (Alkon *et al.*, 2020). Causing supply-chain disruptions, partial food shortages, volatile food prices, these emergences have sparked attention to the vulnerabilities of (dominant) food systems (Ilieva *et al.*, 2023). Such vulnerabilities and risks are further accentuated by conditions of crisis pushed by geopolitical conflicts. The war in Ukraine has for instance caused drops in grain production, reduction of grain exports and higher food prices, further aggravating the "global food crisis" (European Council, 2024). Moreover, further situations of crisis and uncertainty affecting the (urban) food domain, are provoked by the instability of political regimes causing political shifts towards conservative governments at different levels (Andreola *et al.*, 2021). Finally, the looming climate change

emergency put further threats on food systems and societies, calling for imminent action (Wallace-Wells, 2019).

Yet, if crises are phases in which food system challenges emerge more visibly, provoking instabilities and disruption, crisis and post-crisis moments are also critical times in which (new) governance and policy responses are devised and negotiated. The urban food planning literature has highlighted how, in many contexts, the very genesis of urban food governance and policy structures is urged by the need to provide responses to key food systems´ "crises", such as health, food security, or food justice emergencies (Glennie & Alkon, 2018). This is valid not only for the case of Toronto, but also for many other urban contexts around the world (IPES Food, 2017b). A very popular case in the Global South is Belo Horizonte (Brazil). In that city, key food governance and policy institutions have been created in the early 1990s largely as a response to dramatic conditions of absolute poverty and food insecurity affecting citizens (Lappé, 2011). A key role in activating food security policies in Belo Horizonte has been played by Mayor Patrus Ananias and by motivated administrative staff. Recognizing the emergency, these actors took responsibility for the development of municipal governing structures that could deliver policies and programs supporting an alternative food system in Belo Horizonte (Rocha & Lessa, 2009).

Referring to the financial downturn and austerity measures of the 2008-2009, authors such as Skordili (2013) underline how crises can provide opportunities to make the food question "politically visible" in the city. This can invite urban actors to see important connections that were previously unnoticed, such as the ones between food insecurity, health and well-being (Skordili, 2013). Referring to the recent health emergency triggered by the Covid-19, other scholarly contributions highlight not only threats, but also opportunities provided by such crisis (Cattivelli, 2022). Such opportunities for instance relate to the building of socially innovative initiatives forging food emergency infrastructures to cope with food

insecurity conditions; the strengthening of solidarity relations among actors; the reinforcement of alternative food networks based on direct links between consumers and producers (Maurano & Forno, 2017; Tarra *et al.*, 2021).

In synthesis, crises can usher threats and destruction, but they can also provide opportunities for new initiatives to emerge and stir food systems´ governance forward. A way to investigate these dynamics is by looking at how crises emphasize socio-political tensions, triggering responses that can outlast the crisis itself.

2.1. Crises, socio-political tensions and their consequences

To illustrate how socio-political tensions manifest in urban food movements and to elaborate on the role of crises in triggering and amplifying such tensions, it is useful to refer to concepts and approaches coming from literature on social innovation and multi-level governance (García & Pradel, 2019; Moulaert *et al.*, 2013; Moulaert & MacCallum, 2019). Such literature highlights how actors mobilize themselves, building organizations and networks, in order to fulfil unmet needs – such as the need for housing, citizenship rights, or adequate and nutritious food (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013). Thus, for instance, a community food security organization activating an alternative food distribution system can be an example of socially innovative initiative seeking to provide adequate food for people in need. Reacting to hostile socio-economic conditions, and building an alternative response to experienced food insecurity, such an initiative seeks for greater empowerment of participating actors, while at the same time advocating for changes at wider socio-institutional levels (Sage, 2014). Some studies on social innovation have elucidated how, by triggering processes of economic, social and political change, phases of crisis and socio-political instability act as both, triggers and testing ground of socially innovative initiatives (Parés *et al.*, 2017). In fact, accentuating

key problems, crises provoke the emergence of new initiatives, networks, organizational dynamics and governance arrangements. One straightforward example is the need to deal with shifting political regimes fostering instability and uncertainty in terms of resources and support to the urban food movement. This condition of instability pushes food movement initiatives to advocate for supportive political spaces and, consequently, to re-negotiate adapted forms of institutionalization.

We could therefore argue that experienced conditions of crisis intensify critical socio-political tensions. Such tensions stem from the hybrid inter-activity among actors, value systems, organizational dynamics, policy responses, socio-political arrangements, which particularly manifest in conditions of socio-political or socio-ecological emergency (Manganelli, 2022) Thus, factors such as shifting political climates, worsened conditions of food insecurity, amplified food system inequities, and so on, intensify tensions among actors, organizations, institutions, their underlying logics and value systems.

When looking at both, short and long-term trajectories, tensions stemming from phases of disruption and uncertainty can lead to different outcomes. On the one hand, triggering sentiments of failure or frustration among actors, tensions can put into question, or radically reshuffle pre-existing urban food movement initiatives and their governance arrangements. As the case of Toronto shows, a food policy council can be severely threatened by exogenous factors related to changes in political regimes and new directions in the allocation of funding (see the following section). The same is valid for a food strategy or other types of food movement initiatives relying on a rather fragile institutional anchoring (Andreola *et al.*, 2021; Sonnino & Coulson, 2021). Yet, tensions can also trigger proactive responses consisting for instance of the activation of new networks and communication channels, the building advocacy coalitions, the search for new collaborative arrangements and joint modes of co-governance (Manganelli, 2020). As such, when looking

at longer-term consequences, tensions can also be breeding ground for the redefinition of meanings and trajectories, potentially leading to new initiatives, governance innovations, and adapted institutional structures. Crucial to these processes is the capacity of food movement actors and initiatives to re-frame key values and recalibrate organizational strategies as a result of experienced tensions (Fridman & Lenters, 2013). As such, product of these processes can be the building of new initiatives, organizations and institutional arrangements that further advocate for the cause of food system change in the city. As a result, responses to socio-political tensions can also can consist of devising new meanings and anchoring-points that help to make sense of the food movement and to legitimize its role within changing circumstances.

3. Re-reading the development of the Toronto food movement under a crisis lens

What follows constitutes a synthetic account of different stages of the Toronto food movement´s history. These phases are marked by moments of crisis, ushering the emergence of socio-political tensions and triggering specific courses of action. Section 3.1 observes how urgencies related to food insecurity, poverty, and socio-economic distress have triggered the genesis of the food movement back in the 1980s. Section 3.2 analyses how changes in the socio-institutional landscape at wider scales have acted as crisis-factors ushering Toronto food governing institutions to (re)advocate for their legitimacy. Section 3.3 illuminates the current situation, where a convergence of different crises has unsettled the urban food movement provoking consequences which are still ongoing. The analysis of this trajectory, which certainly bears the limits of simplification, is based on several years of research on the Toronto food movement, research which I started in 2017 and carried out until recent times. This investigation has informed a doctoral research as well as a book monograph (Manganelli, 2022), from which some of the empirical

insights are derived.

3.1. Crisis factors generating tensions at the genesis of the Toronto food movement

The genesis of the contemporary Toronto food movement can be traced back in the 1970s-1980s. That period was characterized by a condition of crisis, provoked by a socio-economic and financial downturn affecting Toronto citizens as much as other localities in North America and the Global North (Fisher, 2017; Riches, 1999). In that context, Toronto citizens, especially the most vulnerable, were facing precarious conditions of unemployment and socio-economic distress, leading to tangible situations of poverty and food insecurity:

> "People were literally missing meals (…) if they had social assistance, it was mainly in the fourth week of the month when people were running out of money and running out of food (…) and at that time of the month food banks had the biggest demand" (interview with a former TFPC coordinator).

These conditions of socio-economic insecurity provoked feelings of shock and concern which cut across political divides and spread across civil society networks. Thus, socio-political tensions are readable in a diffused perception of concern and urgency, as much as in the immediate responses that were given as a way to cope with this context of crisis. Such responses involved a hybridity of agential, organizational and political dynamics popping up and interrelating among each other in diverse ways. First, food banks and emergency food networks started to emerge and, very quickly, to escalate and gradually institutionalize as stop-gap responses to food insecurity conditions (Fisher, 2017; Tarasuk *et al.*, 2020). Provoking concerns and discussions, these emergency networks intermeshed with other waves of food security and anti-poverty initiatives. Examples are coalitions such as the Basic Poverty Action Group, or the "Bread, not

circuses", calling for actions against hunger, poverty and homelessness (courtesy of a community worker and scholar at the Toronto Metropolitan University; see also Manganelli, 2022). Furthermore, other initiatives popped up which hybridised with emergency food networks to a considerable extent, but which also embraced a very distinct character and value systems. These were community food security organizations, taking action against food insecurity whilst seeking for community empowerment and holding state accountable for more structural measures to eradicate food insecurity and poverty (courtesy of Toronto FoodShare; see also Roberts, 2014).

Among these community food security organizations were initiatives such as the STOP community food centre and Toronto FoodShare – key protagonists of the Toronto food movement. Started as community initiatives seeking to link food insecure inhabitants with agencies donating surplus food, the genesis of FoodShare and the STOP should be contextualized in socio-political struggles to seek for alternative approaches to dealing with hunger and food insecurity. In particular, the genesis of FoodShare has been officially formalized through the synergetic encounter between community concerns on the one hand, and the political will to act against food insecurity on the other hand. In fact, it was Mayor Art Eggleton, urged by concerned city councillors, who, in a renowned policy statement launched in 1985, declared that Toronto should become "a catalyst in the creation of food coops by providing vehicles for transportation of food orders from the Terminal Market to coop distribution sites" (City of Toronto, 1985, p 4). Some of the interviewed food movement actors consider that policy document as the first progressive food security policy for the City of Toronto (courtesy of interviewed actors in Toronto). Clearly, this is a product of the socio-political tensions triggered by the recognition of a situation of crisis. This crisis urged social and political agencies of the City of Toronto to mobilize themselves, aligning towards a common political and social mission.

It is in this context of socio-political tensions and experimented responses that the genesis of the Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) – other key pillar of the Toronto food movement – should be contextualized. Officially set up in 1991 (Blay-Palmer, 2009), the TFPC features as a forward-looking organization demonstrating a clear engagement in fostering alternative approaches to food insecurity and poverty (Roberts, 2014; Stahlbrand & Roberts, 2022). In particular, the genesis of the Council locates in the confluence of multiple socio-political factors and forces, of which two are of particular importance. First, the clear will to counteract the escalation of foodbanks as the dominant mode of coping with the emergency (courtesy of a former TFPC coordinator). Indeed, among others, the genesis of the TFPC was pushed by progressive city councillors, such as Jack Layton and Dan Leckie, who aligned with Mayor Art Eggleton in considering food insecurity and poverty as unacceptable conditions (courtesy of a former TFPC coordinator, see also Manganelli, 2022). Second, the leadership of progressive public officials in Toronto Public Health who embraced the mission of the Healthy City Movement which, at that time, was spreading internationally. As a progressive public agency, already at that time Toronto Public Health had an advanced understanding of the structural conditions and socio-economic leverages determining health and wellbeing of urban communities, food being one of them (Hancock, 2017). As such, thanks to institutional innovations pushed by experienced socio-political tensions, the TFPC was established as an innovative and semi-institutionalised food organisation, housed in Toronto Public Health while representing diverse political and community voices across the City.

Since the early stage, the TFPC began to engage in a systemic approach to food insecurity and health, tackling multiple sections of the food system (Blay-Palmer, 2009). This translated in the search for alliances and in the development of joint projects with other actors of the food system, such as farmers and advocates of sustainable agriculture, retailers, food entrepreneurs, city councillors, together with community food securi-

ty organizations such as FoodShare, and representative of anti-poverty movements (see Manganelli, 2022). If TFPC actors engaged in alliances, advocacy and joint-projects with the genuine will to develop systemic food policy responses, these actions had also the purpose of establishing a degree of legitimacy and reputation of the TFPC at the eyes of wider municipal structures. As the first TPFC coordinator states,

> we knew right away that we had to work on two levels: long term policy change, but we also needed some short-term project, because the short-term victories would help us to establish our credentials: why we needed to exist.

These words reveal how crisis-factors ushering tensions are not only dependent from exogenous causes; besides, they also relate to the intrinsic status of a nascent food movement, shaping its governance and policy institutions, while at the same time legitimizing its role within existing institutional and governance structures of the city. Such tensions will pop up to an even greater degree in the second phase.

3.2. A second stage bringing new disruptions as well as opportunities in the movement

When looking at the overall trajectory of the contemporary Toronto food movement, a second phase can be identified in the late 1990s-beginning of the 2000s. This phase is marked by radical changes in the socio-institutional landscape of the City of Toronto. To a great extent, such changes acted as crisis´ factors, ushering threatening tensions but also providing new opportunities for the food movement. More specifically, at the end of the 1990s Toronto went through a so-called "amalgamation" process, where the existing Old City of Toronto, corresponding to the downtown area, was eventually absorbed into a larger administrative area, encompassing five neighbouring municipalities (the current Etobicoke, North

York, Scarborough, East York and York). As a result of these processes, Toronto turned from a city of 650,000 inhabitants – i.e. the Old City of Toronto – to an agglomeration of 2.4 million inhabitants (Keil, 2000). The amalgamation process was enforced by top-down decisions of a neoconservative provincial government around 1997. Far from being a linear and consensual process, the amalgamation was perceived by many as a threat, giving place to opposition, protests and fierce reactions (ibid., 2000). In fact, the Old City of Toronto but also suburban municipalities feared the advent of a neo-conservative government which would disrupt progressive local values (courtesy of Toronto food movement actors). In particular, major points of criticisms were potential increases in property taxes, the downloading of social service provision responsibilities to the local level accompanied by other conservative measures consisting of budget cuts and simplifications in the administrative apparatus (Keil, 2000).

These changes in the administrative, political and social landscape of the City had undoubtful repercussions in the urban food movement. As the first TFPC coordinator affirms

> Structural changes dictated by the amalgamation had a huge impact on the ways in which the Council actually worked (...). We had reduced budget and staff support and we had to change our ways of making recommendations that would go to the city councillors (...) The relation to the city council became more distant in a way.

Indeed, due to administrative simplifications dictated from the top, the TFPC experienced the concrete threat of being swept away. As a result of these tensions, the TFPC in particular and the food movement in general had to face multiple challenges. First, once again, the TFPC needed to re-advocate for its identity and legitimacy within a more conservative institutional apparatus, navigating a rather uncomfortable political and administrative environment. Second, the food movement, and the TFPC

within it, had to build new social, political and spatial relations with an enlarged metropolitan area; third, and consequently, the amalgamation event reinforced food insecurity and food systems´ concerns, due to the need to consider an enlarged urban area.

Fear, threat and disruption were not the only consequences of the tensions experienced with the amalgamation "crisis". On the contrary, these tensions also triggered proactive responses, visible in the building of new alliances and coalitions which could reaffirm the need for a progressive food security and health agenda for the City. One of these coalitions was the Food and Hunger Action Committee (FHAC) put into place thanks to the leadership and facilitation role of Wayne Roberts, the second TFPC coordinator. Besides documenting the state of hunger and food security in Toronto, the FHAC was responsible for elaborating the Food Charter as well as the Food and Hunger Action Plan for Toronto, urging for "concrete strategies to improve food security for all Torontonians" (cit. from the Toronto Food Charter and Food and Hunger Action Committee Phase II Report). As Wayne Roberts affirms, the launch of the Food Charter was an emblematic process which opened a whole new field of action for the Toronto food movement. A second coalition was the so-called "Environmental Task Force", composed by the TFPC in alliance with key Municipal officials and other actors. Issuing an environmental plan for Toronto, this coalition argued for the enhancement of urban agriculture, green roofs and other environmentally-led initiatives which could mobilize food to address sustainability challenges. Thus, these processes show how actors and organizations such as the TFPC were proactive in arguing for a legitimate role for the food movement within changing circumstances. These struggles resulted into the forging of new coalitions and policy initiatives that allowed to open up new spaces of action.

Overall, a further product of that phase of tensions and opportunities is the building of a more mature Toronto food movement which, few years later in 2008, would have brought to the establishments of the Toronto

Food Strategy.

Key Toronto food movement actors agree in considering the FHAC´s experience and the establishment of the Toronto Food Charter as essential preludes to the Toronto Food Strategy. Indeed, advocated, among others, by food movement leaders and community members belonging to the TFPC, the Food Strategy further develops the FHAC and the TPFC´s approach of looking at the food question through a systemic perspective (courtesy of the food strategy manager and other actors).

In fact, housed in Toronto Public Health thanks to the supportive role of the head of unit – i.e. the medical officer of Health – since the beginning, the Food Strategy team engaged in searching for synergies and collaborations in concrete projects, services and policies, with other city departments. These departments are, for instance, the Planning Division, Parks and Recreation, Social Development Finance and Administration (SDFA), the Environmental Office and Licenses (courtesy of the Food Strategy manager, see also Manganelli 2022). In fact, as the food strategy manager highlights,

> The best way of realising a systemic approach is to establish strong linkages with multiple divisions across the City (…).

This conscious attempt to co-construct a framework for local food policy delivery entailing the creation of systemic linkages across divisions will be consistently developed in subsequent phases of the food movement, up to the recent stage. Indeed, also thanks to engagement of Toronto in international food policy networks, such as the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, the C40 Cities network and similar, what is noticeable in the central years of the Food Strategy and the TFPC is the intention to further scale up and accelerate a food system lens. These dynamics have led to the adoption of a resolution by the City Council in 2019, called the "Food Lens". This resolution urges all city divisions to integrate a food perspective in their own practices and programs. While this process evidences the maturity of the Toronto food movement and its governing institutions, the approval of the Food Lens also coincided with a new stage of crisis and disruption.

3.3. The contemporary phase: an intermingling of crisis factors

It is not far from reality affirming that nowadays the Toronto food movement, and its governance and policy institutions, entered a new stage, undergoing profound tensions. These tensions were to a great extent produced by the concurrence of multiple crises. First, the advent of the Covid-19, producing a health and socio-economic emergency that has revamped food insecurity concerns; second, socio-racial justice struggles further re-awakened by the epidemic emergency, but also revealing more profound sources tensions within the food movement itself; third, political shifts at the Provincial level which fostered threats of neo-conservative measures and budget cuts.

To a large extent, the Covid-19 emergency has brought the Toronto food movement back to a condition of crisis and socio-economic insecurity as it was experienced at the genesis of the movement in the 1980s (Friedmann, 2020). As a health and socio-economic emergency, the Covid-19 has further aggravated existing inequities related to systemic determinants of poverty and food insecurity, particularly hitting the most vulnerable community groups (Alkon *et al.*, 2020). In Toronto, among the immediate effects of this crisis, there has been the escalation of foodbanks, charitable organizations, and emergency food networks, dealing with the emergency while trying to comply with Covid-19 restrictions. In this context, spaces such as libraries, community centres, or other structures were utilized as alternative food emergency infrastructures. While solidarity food networks were organizing and hybridizing among each other to provide stop-gap solutions to an imminent emergency, this crisis has

also sparked profound tensions and criticalities that are in a way endogenous to the food movement.

In particular, a major (re)emerging tension is the one around socio-racial justice and the representation of people of color in the food system. Concerns about the structural disadvantage of minorities, Black and indigenous people in the food system are not something new. In fact, all along the trajectory of the food movement, specific actors have advanced socio-racial justice concerns, and communities of color have been activating food justice-oriented initiatives in Toronto (see also Manganelli, 2022). Yet, the Covid-19 emergency certainly constituted a further wake-up call for food justice leaders, making visible the structural disadvantage experienced by racialized communities (courtesy of food justice leaders in Toronto). The recent re-awakening of food justice tensions is of particular importance in this phase as these tensions reveal areas of fragmentation and friction within the food movement. In particular, around the 2020, TFPC members of Black origins launched a severe food justice critique to the TFPC. This critique, materialized in an open letter to the TPFC, denounced the Council for its lack of consideration of Black food sovereignty objectives in its agenda and priorities, thus for overlooking a diversity of voices within the movement (courtesy of food justice leaders in Toronto). Certainly, the food justice critique constituted a potent warning for TFPC members, making them reflect on role of this organization for the future of the food movement:

> We are in a desperate need for renewal of our membership (…) we will need to make a change. We must be better at involving and ensuring that those voices are loud and clear at the policy table. I think the Council is at risk of not being relevant it if can´t be a Council for all the people who live in the City (interview with the TFPC chair in 2021).

Yet, the food justice critique is not the only element of tension affecting the TFPC (and wider food policy institutions) in the recent stage, up to the point of putting into question the very existence and role of this organisation. In fact, resonating with top-down policy shifts occurred during the amalgamation phase, in 2019 a newly elected and neo-conservative Provincial government announced drastic funding cuts and simplification measures for Public Health units across the Province (see Manganelli, 2022). This announcement infused perceptions of threat and uncertainty among food policy leaders and administrative staff. In particular, these actors feared that food strategy work within the Board of Health would be dismantled. After all, the advent of the Covid-19 had induced a further reprioritisation of human and financial resources to health and emergency measures, thus leaving food strategy staff in a precarious setting. As a result of this juncture, appointed food strategy officials left their position within the Public Health unit. Furthermore, the TFPC also fell in a paralysed situation, with no budget, lack of coordination, and uncertain perspectives in terms of institutional setting and in terms of its very existence.

At present, the Toronto Food Strategy and TFPC do not exist anymore in the form in which they had been operating for many years. Food policy work has now shifted to a different institutional setting, being merged with the Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy within the Social Development Finance and Administration Department. This shift makes food strategy work more strongly linked to food security and anti-poverty objectives. This reshuffling of framings, objectives, resources and institutional anchoring has provoked diverging perceptions, and also conflicts, across food movement actors, resulting in a mix of perceived threats and opportunities. Certainly, with some similarities to what happened in the previous stage, a reshuffled landscape of food policy and governance institutions urges food movement actors to adapt to a new reality, (re) building relationships and forging new alliances in the city. As some of the food policy actors underline, the possibility to effectively (re)embed food system action in Toronto also depends on whether key decision-making

structures of the City will recognise and invest in food work, in terms of political prioritisation and dedicated resources.

4. Discussions and conclusions

Despite the strong focus of this paper on the impact of crises on urban food movements and their governance, it is worth stressing that not every aspect of food systems and food movements is about crises. On the contrary, urban food movements and their governance institutions also unfold in moments of tranquillity. Urban food systems´ governance is fuelled by enabling and cooperative relationships among various actors, and it is supported by a variety of actors and organizations developing alternative food systems through their day-to-day engagement. It can be argued that this ordinary work of relation-building through everyday incremental practices is at least as relevant to the life of urban food movements as the exceptional times of crisis and disruption. Undoubtedly, this everyday engagement in sewing relationship and building connections has played a pivotal role in the Toronto food movement, contributing to make the movement even more equipped to face challenging times (Mah & Thang, 2013). Yet, as this paper seeks to convey, moments of crisis and disruption work as critical testing grounds for urban food movements (Stahlbrand & Roberts, 2022). Indeed, this paper has illustrated how crisis junctures represent critical phases when food governing institutions are put into questions, but also when innovations can emerge, opening up new courses of action and new directions for the urban food movement. This paper intended to illuminate these aspects by investigating what types of socio-political tensions crisis moments have triggered in the Toronto food movement, and how these tensions were through time negotiated by food initiatives. Analysing the trajectory of the movement from its genesis to the contemporary phase has been instrumental to understand the role of socio-political tensions, as destructive or, rather, constructive of new ways forwards and adapted modes of governance.

What follows summarizes useful insights and lessons-learned from the study of the Toronto trajectory through a crisis-lens.

The first and seemingly straightforward takeaway is that (alternative) food systems are indeed prone to crises, and thus, food movements should be aware of both, the endogenous and exogenous factors from which crises (can) derive. Significant factors of crisis in Toronto have revolved around food insecurity, socio-racial justice, and health. Revamped by exogenous conditions of socio-economic instability, austerity, and, later, by the epidemic emergency, the reawakening of food insecurity has produced tangible tensions in the movement (Friedmann, 2020; Tarasuk *et al.*, 2020). In particular, this problem has generated internal tensions among divergent and yet, sometimes hybridizing responses to food insecurity and injustice. These responses consist of food banks and food emergency networks versus more structural measures advocated by key protagonists of the Toronto food movement (Stahlbrand & Roberts, 2022). Revamped by the recent Covid-19 emergency, nowadays food insecurity, food justice and poverty still constitute unsolved challenges, qualifying the very institutional anchoring of the movement, not without contestations and conflicts. Not dissimilarly from urban food movements in other contexts, nowadays the big challenge for Toronto food governing institutions is to re-establish a systemic approach to food governance. Such an approach should address the problem food insecurity and food justice in tandem with apparently more "silent" sources of crisis, such as the climate change and climate justice emergency.

A second valuable lesson is that crises and socio-political tensions are not only destructive. On the contrary, as demonstrated in different stages of the Toronto food movement trajectory, tensions can give place to new opportunities and spaces of action for the movement. Windows of opportunity can consist of the creation of new actors´ coalitions or advocacy networks carving out supportive institutional spaces and pushing the food agenda further; such innovations can contribute to reshape ac-

tors´ relations and redefine a place and role for food governing institutions in the city (see in particular section 3.2 and 3.3). As such, urban food movements should be able to take the crisis-juncture as an opportunity, fuelled by the capacity of the movement to learn from phases of crisis, and to embed such learning in their governing practices (see also Manganelli, 2020). Analysing food movement trajectories in different contexts and sharing insights from different cases can help food movements to learn from other experiences.

Despite the undoubtful opportunities brought about by governance innovations in times crisis, critical disruptions are also revelatory of the weak and often contested institutionalization of food governance and policy institutions in city-regional contexts. The fact that the very existence of the TFPC have been threatened multiple times over the course of the Toronto trajectory is indicative of the rather precarious institutional status of the food movement. As a matter of fact, the TFPC is more renown at the international level, across urban food policy circuits, than within the multi-faceted institutional structure of the municipality of Toronto. The challenge of acquiring a supportive and, at the same time, adapted institutional setting – with a political mandate, an agreed agenda of priorities and associated resources – is still a battleground for food movements in different localities (Moragues-Faus *et al.*, 2022). While a common receipt towards institutionalization does not exist – given the variety of possible institutionalization modes and trajectories –, crisis-moments can be suitable times in which strategizing for a place for food in the municipal agenda.

Finally, a last insight from the paper is that crises invite to recognize and cherish the heterogeneity of values and practices characterizing alternative food initiatives. While both scientific and professional communities have often the tendency to delimit the space of urban food governance to food policy councils and food strategies, the heterogeneity of the food movement goes far beyond those structures. Particularly revelatory of

those aspects are food justice struggles advanced by actors who are often left out of the picture, such as farmers, migrants, women, black and indigenous people (Herman & Goodman, 2018). As the Toronto experience illustrates, those initiatives activate their heterodox food movements, calling for inclusive food governance structures able to represent their voices. Such struggles become even more striking in crisis moments. We could therefore argue that when a food movement is able to recognize and endorse this multivocality, it will make bigger steps ahead toward its resilience and prosperity in times of crisis.

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