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# Empowering food democracy. The possible role of social actors in democratising food system(s)

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***Abstract***

*This article explores opportunities for democratising food systems through food democracy, social learning and actors, and democratic practices. Amid a global decline in democracy and challenges in the food system, food democracy—coined by Tim Lang—offers a means to empower all actors in the food chain. This concept calls for increased consumer participation and collective action to influence food policies and practices. Social learning and actors, as a collective process, provides spaces for identifying issues and making deliberative decisions. The proposal highlights how combining social learning and actors with democratic methods can guide individuals toward a more democratic and sustainable food system*

*Questo articolo esplora le opportunità di democratizzazione dei sistemi alimentari attraverso la democrazia alimentare, l'apprendimento sociale e gli attori e le pratiche democratiche. In un contesto di declino globale della democrazia e di sfide nel sistema alimentare, la democrazia alimentare, definita da Tim Lang, offre un mezzo per dare potere a tutti gli attori della catena alimentare. Questo concetto richiede una maggiore partecipazione dei consumatori e un'azione collettiva per influenzare le politiche e le pratiche alimentari. L'apprendimento sociale e gli attori, in quanto processo collettivo, offrono spazi per identificare i problemi e prendere decisioni deliberative. La proposta evidenzia come la combinazione di apprendimento sociale e attori con metodi democratici possa guidare gli individui verso un sistema alimentare più democratico e sostenibile.*

**Parole Chiave/Keywords:** *food democracy/democrazia alimentare, food systems/sistemi del cibo, democratic practices/pratiche democratiche, social actors/attori sociali*

## 1. Introduction: neoliberalism and globalisation rule our food system(s)

Nowadays, while democratisation is unweakened day by day, fervent globalisation and neoliberalism have unhinged ethics from the economy, creating structural obstacles to the protection of human rights and the environment. Everything around us suffers from the effects of globalisation and the neoliberal logic of economics, including food and the food system. The globalised food systems, established as a result of multilateral agreements, are emblematic of this process: incredibly long chains crossing the globe and continents, leaving some people in hunger and malnutrition and others in obesity. The dehumanisation of labour and women's labour, injustices in distribution and production, environmental injustice and environmental degradation characterise market economies.

Access to food represents one of a person's fundamental rights, not-

withstanding that between 702 and 828 million people faced hunger in 2021 – 150 million more people since 2019 (FAO, 2022) and between 691 and 783 million people in 2022 (FAO, 2023). Food insecurity remained stable at the global level and the inequalities were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic that contributed to keeping away the goal of eliminating hunger, embedded by SDG2[1]. The financialisation of agricultural and foodstuffs made food products as mere commodities. A few transnational corporations own a monopoly over economic systems and the food chain, threatening livelihoods and the environment where local food products are produced: monopolising lands, seeds, water and food resources. Whereas everyone could say that buying and eating products from multinational corporations is easier and more accessible, accessing fresh local products for many is becoming unpracticable: almost 3.1 billion people were unable to afford a healthy diet in 2020, reflecting the inflation in consumer prices[2]. Food democracy appeared as a countermovement to balance power and control within food policy and the food system and in relation to other actors in the food systems could be a s

By examining the role of an association like Eating City in fostering food democracy, this research underscores the transformative potential of these actors harnessing informal learning, social dialogue to empower individuals in addressing food system challenges. However, the findings also reveal the necessity for broader collaborations with policymakers and institutional actors to scale up these innovations for a more democratic and sustainable food system. This study could represent an input to explore future institutional experimentation and innovation, essential for enhancing food system democratisation on a larger scale. This paper proceeds as follows: first, it outlines the conceptual framework adapted for this study, namely food democracy and democratic practices and innovation of food democracy at the policy level, the methodology, following results and discussion with the case study limitation and ultimately this research limitation.

## 2. Conceptual Framework: food democracy and democratic practices

During the 1990s, scholars observed how agro-food multinational corporations shaped food policies more than governments, eluding democratic control (Baldy; Kruse, 2019). In this context, Lang elaborated on food democracy, as a countermovement to balance power and control within food policy and the food system (Hassanein, 2003; Lang, 1998).

Food democracy aims to give back power to all the actors involved in the food chain, from the producers to the consumers, who must determine their choices and opinion over the food system. Food democracy thus becomes also a means for collective action, promoting active participation practices to determine political and social policies characterised by the values of social and economic justice, environmental sustainability, and democratic governance. Within a food democracy, people are considered 'food citizens' rather than just consumers or producers. The production, distribution and consumption of food all become democratic practices. As the term suggests, democracy is the tool to foster citizens' participation in food system decision-making to achieve the right of all citizens to have access to a healthy, decent, and affordable diet (Lang, 1999). Thus, food democracy relies on the empowerment of all actors, beyond the fragmentation of interests over the entire food supply chain. Power-sharing is needed in urban and local food systems to raise the sense of responsibility and participation, fostering bottom-up approaches. To reach such objective, open, transparent and participatory food policies (e.g.

1 Sustainable Development Goal 2, Zero Hunger. Available at: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal2. Last visited on August 17th, 2022.

2 FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2022. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022. Repurposing food and agricultural policies to make healthy diets more affordable. Rome, FAO. https://doi.org/10.4060/cc0639en.

through food councils) are needed to support the needs of farmers, citizens and more generally all workers involved in the food chain, to ensure food security, access to land and ecosystem services management, both within and outside cities.

### *2.1. Food democracy dimensions at the individual level and Community Level*

Hassanein (2008) is one of the few scholars who proposed four key dimensions that enable individuals' meaningful participation in food democracy processes. The dimensions involve *knowledge* and becoming knowledgeable about food and food systems (Hassanein, 2008:290). The second key dimension comprises *sharing ideas*, which involves clarifying and discussing food-related issues and values among participants with the effect that they reflect on decisions concerning food-related issues (Hassanein, 2008, p. 290).

The third dimension refers to *efficacy* as the individuals' capacity to address and solve food problems, whereas a fourth dimension implies an *orientation towards the community good*, caring about general well-being in a way that considers communities of place we inhabit" (Hassanein, 2008: 291).

This framework is a descriptive model of how an urban food system could foster food democracy but it could further be a descriptive model of how actors could contribute to food democracy. First, collaboration among actors can create opportunities for innovations, for increasing actors' participation and broadening the understanding of the food system (Hassanein 2003, 2008). Food democracy gathers citizens and actors in the food system who care about the community good (Hassanein 2008), through small actions and practices. Citizens and actors in the food system need the knowledge necessary about food and the food system to participate effectively in their local food system and build food democracy because co-learning allows for learning from one another about the sustainability of food and the food system (Levkoe 2006; Hassanein 2008). In this context social actors like civil society organisations, cooperatives, NGOs, and grassroots initiatives address environmental, societal, and food system challenges by working for collective societal interests (Andrée et al. 2019). These third-sector organizations tackle specific issues or support particular groups, providing services, advocacy, and raising awareness. Despite challenges, these actors foster positive social transformation, driving sustainability and democratising the food system through collective action and policy engagement. Food democracy has also been criticised for being simplistic in its views on the food system, idealising the local scale opportunities while demonising the mainstream food system and, as underlined by Cochrane, Hopma and Thomson (2020) to not address the social cleavages affecting food access. However, democracy has shapes and possibilities offered by its spectrum, as one of the most contested studies in political science because oftentimes criticised, undermined and questioned. This article uses the outcomes democracy creates, the so-called 'democratic practices' elaborated by the US-based Kettering Foundation. Democratic practices[3] are embedded with simple actions: firstly, starting by *discussing problems* affecting an object, a group of people, a sector. *Naming* is the subsequent political practice because the name given to a problem defines what is necessary to solve it. After *naming* and *discussing*, debates often result in options proposals to tackle certain issues. The discussions are followed by an assessment of the possible consequences that might result from one set of actions or another, *making decisions deliberatively*, perhaps changing their opinions as they learn about someone else's experience. Eventually, they may establish work and tasks that they need to do with other citizens, something they

3 Democratic Practices, available at: https://www.kettering.org/core-insights/democratic-practices. Last visited on August 6, 2022

want a government to do, or both. These 'political' practices identify and commit civic resources. Furthermore, commitments produce collective political will and possibly result in organising civic actions, a practice that brings the many and various resources a citizenry has to bear on a problem. Action is normally followed by evaluating what was accomplished, and learning together in order to distinguish collective from individual learning. Such practices provide the instruments needed to address difficulties faced by communities.


Figure 1 - Democratic Practices Source: Kettering Foundation.

Decision-making, particularly in the realm of food, concerns every human being given the essentiality of food for every life, that is why I argue that democratic practices should be fostered: they represent ways citizens can work together—even when they disagree—to address shared problems affecting different fields of public life. Nonetheless, in the food system nutrition and health, equitable distribution, supporting livelihoods, environmental sustainability, and social justice represent important 'goods' to reach. What kind of participation is required to balance these goods? This question has been raised and addressed by Cochrane, Thompson and Hopma (2020). 'Democratising' food goes beyond voting (Cochrane; Lang, 2020). I identify diverse goods, actors and agents to democratise the food system empowering people and contributing to the decommodification of food as a whole: education, informal learning and social dialogue, and the actors providing these spaces forlearning and dialogue. To explore the deeper meaning and practice of food democracy, the above conceptual framework has been applied.

## 3. Food Democracy at the policy level , City-to-City Cooperation and MUFPP

Classical command-and-control policies (e.g., food safety regulations) and economic incentives (e.g., 'fat taxes') often raise concerns about infringing on people's autonomy rather than addressing power dynamics between the state, food corporations, and citizens (Gumbert, 2019; Mazzocchi et al., 2015 in Bornemann; Weiland, 2019). In recent years, the European Green Deal has aimed to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society with a modern, resource-efficient, and competitive economy by 2050. A key part of this is the Farm to Fork Strategy, which seeks to create a fair, healthy, and environmentally-friendly food system. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development focuses on People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Collaboration, highlighting food as essential for self-sustenance but not explicitly mentioning democracy as a means to achieve sustainable development. Goal 17 emphasises global and multi-stakeholder collaboration, underscoring the need to strengthen connections between politics, economic actors, and civil society. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the need for more local approaches to food governance to build a more equitable food system (Cohen; Ilieva, 2021). Even before the pandemic, food accessibility inequalities existed between groups, cities, and regions. Cities are now leading the development of innovative policies to address food-related issues, driven by increased attention to food system challenges (Pettenati; Toldo, 2018). The Milan Urban Food

Policy Pact (MUFPP), signed by over 200 cities worldwide, has committed to creating sustainable and resilient food systems. Initially proposed by Milan's Mayor in 2014, the MUFPP has set the foundation for cities to develop inclusive, resilient, and nutrition-sensitive food strategies. MUFPP's commitments include integrating food policy into existing mandates, linking food policy to other related policies, and involving food system actors in policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring (Forster et al., 2015). Following MUFPP, the Municipality of Milan and other organizations launched the Food Wave project to engage young people in climate and food issues. The 4-year project (2019-2022) aimed to raise awareness and involvement among young people on climate change and urban food policies, involving a consortium of 28 partners across Italy and Europe, including Eating City. Food policies must operate at local, regional, national, and international levels, integrating relationships between local and global markets. City-to-city partnerships and democratizing urban governance through exchanges, tools, and spaces involving relevant stakeholders, citizens, and social actors are crucial (Ngaje, 2018). Producers, distributors, workers, and citizens must be included in redesigning and shaping the food system, with social economy actors playing a pivotal role. Transforming food systems requires large-scale citizen action grounded in democratic practices and alternative spaces.

### *3.1. Methodology*

This article starts with a literature review conducted through straightforward search terms ('food democracy' and/or 'food democracies') to find scholarly publications on food democracy. Four academic databases were searched most recently in 2022 and ultimately in 2024: 1) Science Direct 2) Web of Science 3) Scopus 4) Google Scholar. The selection process used three inclusion criteria: 1) contains at least one paragraph on food democracy; 2) English language; 3) peer-reviewed journal publications, conference papers and edited book chapters. These criteria narrowed the selection to only 40 articles, selected to narrate the conceptual framework of this research. The English criteria clearly limited the results to Western scientific products which could represent a further limitation.Drawing from the selected conceptual framework, it employed a qualitative analysis and participant observation resulting from personal involvement in an association, an actor at the niche level, association, involving both food citizens and resource subsystems to explore how it contributes to food democracy. Group discussions in the context of the association's activities were observed and a total of 12 were conducted during the last week of July 2022 and the first week of August, held online. The interviews were clarified through the informed sheet and consent which included important elements to consider about confidentiality. The Eating City International Platform[4] was founded in 2010 as a registered French association. It is co-funded foremost by public and private partners and organises activities within the framework of EU projects. Its foundation aimed to stimulate social and business dialogue, through guidance and research for a more sustainable food system in the public sector[5]. In this decade, Eating City has gained global connections working with young professionals, academics and influencers in the food sector and it was able to connect 270 people around Europe and beyond, thus building a relevant network through a yearly meeting, a summer campus in France and in the last couple of years, youth exchanges under the framework of Food Wave project. Through Eating City, early-career managers, food producers, specialists and students – interested or involved in the food system gained firsthand knowledge of sustainable food systems. Each EC meeting had a Declaration on a specific issue related to the food systems as an output, that started through brainstorming sessions and

4 Following the activities of the Italian NGO "Consorzio Risteco" founded in Turin in 2005, from 2018 the legal entity managing the "Eating City International Platform" become a French NGO called "Risteco – La ville qui mange" with his HQ in Marcieux (Savoie). Eating City or EC sometimes to simplify.

5 Eating City webpage, available at: https://www.eatingcity.org/who-we-are/. Last visited on June 27th, 2022

discussions, a set of steps that fall into the democratic practices. The very first step before starting to write the declaration was a discussion of the food system and its issues, each participant expressed their point of view, according to the own experience and knowledge. From the discussion, participants agreed on the extractive and patriarchal model dominating our society and thus, the food system.

### *3.2. Results and discussion*

To recall the Kettering Foundation definition, "framing" collects and presents options for acting on a problem and also highlights the tensions within and among various options (2016). In this case, participants recognised the need to acknowledge in the food system diversity, gender fluidity and the role of women which is undermined and made as 'vulnerable' in current food systems and to give them back the role in decision-making processes. The discussions implied disagreements and agreements among the participants. However, even when they faced disagreements on a particular issue and\or proposals, discussions led to a decision which was taken and decided together deliberately: the outcome was the declaration draft which was decided deliberately together, step by step.

- Identification of resources: this practice is equally important and it does not refer only to material, financial and social resources which are needed. Resources, in this case, are achievements: local, seasonal, and fair food production is an achievable resource but financial resources are necessary. Similarly, when a local food system is achieved, it becomes a resource.

- Collective learning: when participants approached discussions prior to the drafting, not everyone had the same knowledge about the topics related to the food system analysed but every single individual contributed with their background, their experience, their culture and their deas. Discussions and deliberation lead to collective learning which is a fundamental outcome to empower people and develop critical thinking. The last seven Eating City Summer Campuses involved participants writing a common 'declaration' on their vision and priorities to build sustainable food systems. The summer campus agenda foresaw daily lectures by guest experts on soil fertility, food as a common, sustainable nutrition and gastronomy, food and climate change, public food service in Copenaghen, public food service in Ghent, public food policy in Scotland.

| Participant Code | Country of Origin | Previous Participation | Summer Campus | Interview | Group discussion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | Sweden | x | x | | x |
| P2 | Italy | x | x | x | x |
| P3 | France | | x | | |
| P4 | Belgium | | x | | |
| P5 | Italy | | x | | x |
| P6 | Italy | | x | | x |
| P7 | Egypt | x | x | x | x |
| P8 | Italy | | x | | |
| P9 | Italy | x | x | x | x |
| P10 | Spain | | x | | x |
| P11 | Italy | x | x | x | x |
| P12 | Italy | | x | | |
| P13 | Slovenia | x | x | | x |
| P14 | Italy | x | x | | x |
| P15 | Bosnia Herzegovina– BH | x | x | x | x |
| P16 | BH | x | x | x | |
| P17 | Italy | x | | x | |

Table 1 - Participants' code according to their country of origin who participated to the previous SC and EC activities, individual interviews and group discussions. Source: Author's reproduction.

Group discussions started with a common question 'What do you think is the issue within our food systems?'. Following a round table, participants pointed out: e.g.: 'globalised chain', 'global and transnational chains' (P11), 'lack of involvement of citizens' (P13), 'the climatic, energetic, and financial are all interrelated and drivers of each other and they are reflected in our food system' (P14). To the question 'what would you address to tackle it?', some of the proposals were: 'Shift from global to llobal: for instance, there are Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) as farmers' markets where you rely on small and local producers' (P14) Indeed, AFNs are embedded in daily choices, you chose that farmers' market instead of going to the supermarket: it is a political choice but not everyone can choose. The same participant called for 'civic participation' to involve communities, and stakeholders involved in the food system to participate in decision-making procedures concerning food production, consumption and distribution.

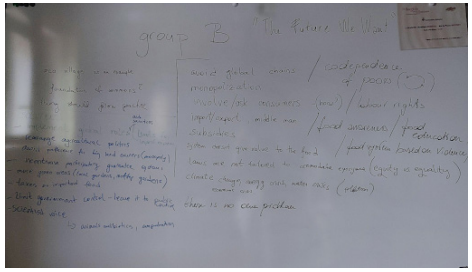


Figure 2 - Brainstorming session group B. July 2022.
Source: Author's personal material.

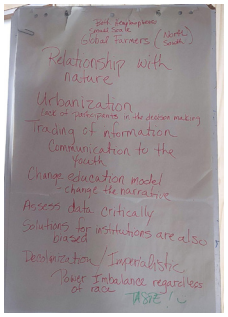


Figure 3 - Brainstorming session group A. July 2022.
Source: Author's personal material.

### *3.3. Eating City Limitations*

This research highlights both the potential and limitations of Eating City and potential of similar actors in democratising food systems, as discussed with participants in group discussions and interviews. One limitation highlighted is the unclear structure and format of Eating City, with new participants questioning its identity and suggesting more diverse activities year-round. Improving communication and involving different target groups could help address this issue. Another limitation is the ambassador network. Although intended to create a strong, lasting network, many ambassadors felt it failed due to a lack of formal structure. A formal network could enhance local actions and raise awareness on food system issues. Some participants also doubted the utility of drafting new declarations without stakeholder involvement, suggesting instead localized summer campuses to connect and educate young people on food system challenges. Participants emphasised the need for more collaboration with policymakers to enhance the impact of Eating City's initiatives. Despite these limitations, Eating City has significantly contributed to social dialogue, co-learning, and community building, empowering individuals to take action locally. One participant shared, "participating in EC activities helped me see how I can act as an individual...now I'm working on establishing my own association for our local food system in Bosnia" (P16). Over the past decade, Eating City has built a wide network across Europe and beyond. This network fosters citizen participation and innovation, but cooperation with stakeholders and policymakers is crucial. A critique from participants was the lack of policy-maker involvement (P1), though past declarations reached important audiences, including an official reading in the European Parliament (BD3). Eating City declarations were readin 2017, during the summit in Valencia of MUFPP, and there was an official reading in the European Parliament. We addressed one of the declaration to the president of the European Union Council who at that time was Mr. Matteo Renzi." (BD3). In 2017, 400 mayors, experts and city delegates from the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact gathered on the occasion of the 3rd MUFPP Annual Gathering and Mayors Summit in Valencia in October 2017 to discuss sustainable urban food systems.

Eating City activities (under EU projects and yearly summer campuses) could further contribute to democratising the food system by fostering collaboration between individuals, through mutual learning. Recalling Hassanein (2003) and Levkoe (2006), to support the transformation of the food system and move towards food democracy, food actors and citizens need to become more knowledgeable about food and the food system (Hassanein 2003; Levkoe 2006) and Eating City proved to be an agent, empowering – consumers particularly – on many different levels Other third-sector actors could foster the same kind of actions, based on informal learning practices, social dialogue and fostering democratic practices and the elements of food democracy.

### *3.4. A model implementing democratic practices and food democracy dimensions as a road to democratise food systems*

The primary challenge facing Eating City is the need to consistently engage with institutional actors and policymakers. For Eating City and similars actors to enhance its impact on food system democratisation, advocating for policy change must become a central part of their mission. Transforming food systems to achieve greater democracy is a lengthy process. This article examined Eating City's contributions and limitations as a small but significant agent of change. Based on the previous analys, I propose a model grounded in two theoretical frameworks: democratic practices and the elements of food democracy, as discussed by Hassenein (2003) and Hessenein (2008). The model starts by coalitions - or new born coalitions of civic society actors at the local level, as building coalitions enhances citizen power and enables organizations to effect change that would be unattainable individually (Hassenein, 2003: 83). These coalitions should incorporate the so called democratic practices, namely *naming and framing issues, deliberation, identifying resources, organising actions, collective learning* and the food democracy dimensions, namely *orientation toward community food systems, efficacy in food system sustainability, co-learning about food system sustainability*. Additionally, the model includes fostering social dialogue and using participative tools, such as Food Policy Councils and informal round tables or working groups. These practices and dimensions, when used together, have the potential to democratise the food system effectively. However, this requires cooperation between actors at both the regime level (institutional actors) and the niche level (civic society actors). This model can be adopted by civic society organizations working to improve the food system, facilitating the democratisation and sustainability of food systems through collaborative efforts.

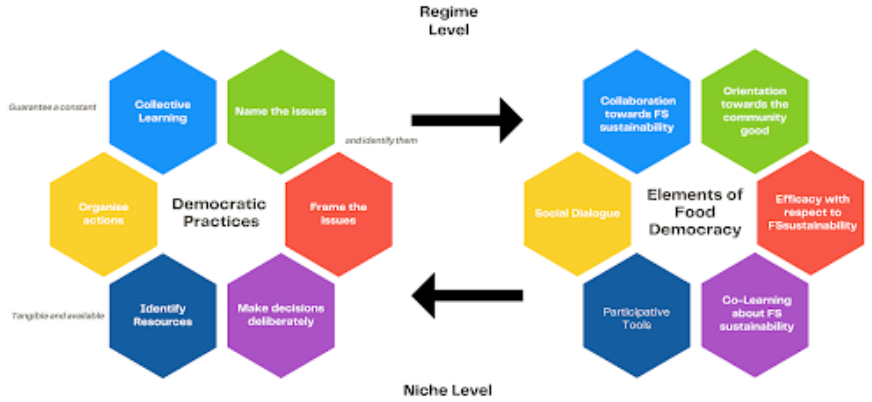


Figure 4 - Model of the merged employment of democratic practices and the elements of food democracy among all the actors at the niche level and regime level.

## 4. Conclusion

This research aimed to analyse the role of niche-level actors and democratic practices in improving food systems through food democracy, which could serve as a foundation for future institutional innovation and experimentation. In this context, the MUFPP represented an institution-

al experimentation that could be further fostered and improved further based on food democracy and collaboration with niche-level actors. Food system democratisation begins with simple actors—community, civil society organisations, and associations like Eating City. These actors provide essential tools and knowledge that empower communities to address local food system issues. Eating City, in particular, has facilitated social dialogue and co-learning, inspiring participants to take local action, highlighting the transformative potential of similar associations efforts, emphasising the need for collaboration with policymakers to scale up their impact.

### *4.1. Research Limitations*

This research's main limitation relates to the possibility to generalise the findings, as one association was analysed. The selection of one case limits the relevance but it may represent a ground for future studies. The results demonstrated that Eating City, in its 12 years of life, has achieved positive outcomes in terms of co-learning, stimulating dialogue on the issues affecting global and local food systems and informal exercise of democratic practices which have the potential to be reproduced by other social actors: this occurred during the process of the declaration draft, as well as during the summer campus' discussions. However, the analysis showed that the relations with institutional actors has been low in these last four years and this represents an effective variable. The selection of Eating City as a case study does not imply the generalisation of the results to all actors organising similar initiatives but it is proof that also very small and to some extent, unknown initiatives can have a positive impact on the democratisation and the food system as a whole. The results obtained might, however, be deepened for future research with other research that has a certain level of similarity and the results can also be interesting to other studies that are focussing on the use of democratic practices in the food system and for food democracy as a bottom-up approach.

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