



An Established Experience. A Conversation on the City Deal Initiative in the Netherlands

Project website: <https://agendastad.nl/over-de-citydealvoedsel/>

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Before delving into the interview with Henk Renting, it is important to outline the two main phases of this network’s development. The first phase began in October 2015 when the Dutch government presented its national food agenda in the “Letter to Parliament on the food agenda for safe, healthy and sustainable food” which laid the foundation for the City Deal Food on the Urban Agenda. Henk participated in this phase as a Programme Manager.

The second phase, launched in October 2021, is called the City Deal Healthy and Sustainable Food Environment. From this phase, eleven cities, three government departments, and various research centres are working together to promote healthier and more sustainable food environments. The participants include the municipalities of Almere, Amsterdam, Ede, Groningen, Haarlem, Rotterdam, Utrecht, The Hague, Tilburg, Venlo, and Wageningen. In this second phase, Henk is involved as an expert, providing his insights and expertise to support the initiative.

How did your network emerge?

The City Deal is a collaboration in the Netherlands between different cities, national governments, and some NGOs working on food policy. The network that exists now is actually the second City Deal. These deals usually last for three years, and I was particularly involved in the first one, called “Food on the Urban Agenda.” As the name suggests, it was focused on developing new ways of putting food on the urban agenda. This City Deal was established around the same time as the MUFPP, which led to growing interest from cities, driven by both local and national policy

agendas, to work more on food policy. Like in other countries, this is a relatively new policy field.

The City Deal emerged as a kind of community of practice, a network to exchange experiences among cities working on new urban food policies in different areas and to move those efforts forward. This City Deal lasted for three years. After that, I have not been directly involved but have continued to follow its progress from the sidelines.

A new City Deal has since been established, focusing more specifically on

the topic of healthy and sustainable food environments. Some new cities are involved, as well as other ministries and new NGOs that were not part of the first City Deal. This one is focused specifically on promoting and stimulating healthy and sustainable food environments.

The second question regards who promoted it; in terms of solutions, people, whatever and who is merging it now?

This is quite interesting because the City Deal is a unique phenomenon in the Netherlands. It's actually a specific legal instrument, falling under the Ministry of the Interior, particularly within the Urban Agenda. The City Deal is used in new policy areas where there isn't yet a clearly established division of responsibilities or relationships between local, regional, and national governments. It's intended as a kind of temporary network or community of practice to help develop these emerging policy areas.

The City Deal instrument was utilized by cities in the first City Deal, which emerged from a combination of factors. On one hand, there was the international development of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, in which some active Dutch cities, especially Amsterdam and Utrecht, were involved. At the same time, there was a national agenda in the Netherlands shifting from agricultural policy toward food policy. The Dutch government, though not heavily involved in food policy today, was at that time advocating for national collaboration on developing food policies. A Food Policy Summit was even organized in the Netherlands, aligning with the growing interest from cities.

In terms of how the network is organized, it is mostly under the Ministry of the Interior's Urban Agenda, which holds the formal responsibility. Each City Deal starts with a formal agreement between all the partners. The cities commit to their specific goals, the ministries outline their roles, and all other partners define their contributions. This is written down in a kind of terms of reference or memorandum. The cities also contribute

with funding and resources.

Additionally, a program manager is usually assigned, funded collectively by the various partners. In the first City Deal, I was the program leader for two to three years, but now someone else leads the new City Deal.

Is there any kind of financial support you have for the activities of the city deal?

Yeah, the funding for the City Deal mostly comes from the different partners. Ministries contribute a larger share, but the amounts are not very large. For example, ministries may provide around €20,000 to €25,000, while cities contribute about €5,000 to €10,000. Together, these contributions create a sufficient budget to run a solid exchange program.

What are the network's goals?

The goals of the network are generally to develop and further these new, emerging policy areas. In the first City Deal, the focus was very much on putting food on the urban agenda, establishing urban food policies as a recognized policy area, and making it more visible by exploring the different relevant sectors. Within this first City Deal, there were three main areas of work. One area focused more on local economic development within food systems, including short supply chains and regional food systems. The second area dealt with the issue of food, health, healthy environments, and social inclusion. The third area, if I remember correctly, was about ecological and economic innovation, strengthening regional food systems, food supply chains, and governance innovation.

In this new City Deal, there are some different topics. One of the feelings after the first City Deal was that, although it managed to establish a network and create good exchanges, it did not manage to achieve very concrete goals in terms of developing new policies. That's why, with this

second City Deal, there was a desire for a stronger focus, and the topic of healthy and sustainable food environments was chosen. This is a very significant topic politically, especially given the issues in inner cities with an overabundance of fast food chains. Local governments, however, don't have the instruments to deal with these problems. So, one of the lines of action has been about how to develop tools like spatial planning and licensing to address the physical challenges of creating healthier and more sustainable food environments.

Another line of action focuses on the social food environment, looking at how communities, networks, and neighborhoods can be used to promote healthier and more sustainable diets and lifestyles. The third line of action is centered on improving the availability of local and regional foods in cities. This City Deal has a clearer focus, aiming to establish concrete policies in these areas.

Now, the question is if you have institutionalized the network and if it has a specific structure. Moreover, I ask you if the network has any manifesto or statute.

Yes, well, a kind of manifesto or statute exists for both of the City Deals in the sense that they started with a very developed and almost negotiated document outlining specific lines of action and activities. However, it's not a manifesto in the traditional sense where they declare, "We stand for this, and we advocate for that." It's more of an agreement on what actions and initiatives will be taken. But over time, the City Deal has also taken on a more declarative role. For example, in the past six or seven years that the City Deal has existed, there have been several declarations from local policymakers about key issues, like the increasing presence of fast food in cities and the need to develop policies around that. So, in that sense, the City Deal has become, to some extent, a platform for advocacy or policy lobbying—although that's a strong word—to highlight the importance of these kinds of activities at the city level.

One notable change in the second City Deal compared to the first is that the first was much more internally focused. It was very much about learning from one another, looking into each other's approaches within the municipalities, and figuring out how to build policies together. It was less about external communication and more about establishing a community and internal learning. In the new City Deal, there is much more media presence and dissemination. For instance, the City Deal has published a magazine a couple of times already, called "Good Food," which showcases the different initiatives and the work being done. So now, there is more of a unified presence, a way of saying, "This is what we stand for, and these are the things we are working on."

What is your idea of local food policy, and which changes would you achieve?

For the network, local food policies are seen as a very important mechanism to address food challenges in an integrated way. This has been a key agenda throughout the City Deal. From the start, the idea was to explore what local food policies could bring in terms of integrating different aspects of food systems.

However, considering the political developments in the Netherlands, this became very difficult. In Dutch national politics, food policy has largely been pushed off the table. The political agenda has shifted to focus almost exclusively on agricultural issues—farmers protesting, manure overproduction, nitrogen challenges, and so on. So, the broader food policy discussions have been overshadowed by agriculture-focused debates. But at the local level, everyone recognizes the huge potential of the food agenda. Local food policies can integrate not just agricultural and economic concerns, but also social inclusion, health challenges, climate change, and more.

Speaking about the New City Deal is a bit more challenging for me, as I

have less detailed involvement in that now. But from what I understand, the New City Deal is much more focused on developing new policy instruments at the local level. The area of healthy and sustainable food environments is one of the key areas where there is clear potential for progress. However, local governments do not yet have the responsibilities or the tools to act effectively, even though they could do a lot in this space.

At the beginning of the New City Deal, the idea was to focus on more concrete topics, defining clear lines of action where we could demonstrate impact. And while that has happened to some extent, the City Deal has also returned to the idea that integrated food policies are crucial. There's a strong undercurrent, where local authorities—and increasingly citizen movements, like the growing number of food policy councils in the Netherlands—are advocating for the importance of local food policies as a mechanism to integrate various sectors and challenges. These councils are working together with local administrations in the City Deal to push this agenda forward.

I understand. And so, the question is: who does this vision involve? So, cities and authorities, associations, collective organizations, individuals?

Yes, so when we talk about cities, it's not necessarily the mayors who are involved, but more often the politicians responsible for food, sustainability, or economic affairs. It varies locally depending on who oversees the food policy area. The ministries play a different role, they aren't the ones voicing what needs to be done but rather engage in discussions with the cities. Additionally, several national NGOs are involved, such as the Dutch Food Agency, which is a state research institute responsible for providing recommendations on healthy diets and related issues. They are very actively involved and advocate for the importance of local food policies.

There is also a national task force working on promoting short food sup-

ply chains, and organizations like the Flevo Campus are involved as well. So, it's a mix of local governments, research institutes, NGOs, and innovation centers. Citizens aren't primary partners, but they are increasingly becoming involved in these discussions and initiatives.

How does this experience relate to higher levels of territorial and food governance?

Yes, very much. I think one of the fascinating aspects of the Dutch City Deal experience is that it's not just cities, city officials, or local movements working together. It's really a multilevel platform that includes the Dutch government and various ministries (Economic Affairs, later Agri-culture, Nature and Food Quality; the Interior and Kingdom Relations and; Health, Welfare and Sport). In fact, there are different ministries involved, and the provinces also play a role. There's strong recognition that in order to implement effective local food policies, policy changes are needed at higher levels to create space for these policies at the local level. This also involves facilitating and supporting those efforts, sometimes through funding or by finding synergies between different governmental levels.

In this sense, the Dutch City Deal serves as an example for other places on how to coordinate food policies across different levels of governance. This is one of the reasons the City Deal has been invited to share its experience in international forums, such as the Milan Pact meetings and FAO food agenda discussions. The Dutch case is a clear example of how food policies can go beyond just local governments, involving collaboration at multiple levels to create broader, more effective initiatives.

What are the relationships with the world of research, the world of grassroots, and the world of business?

Yes, these relationships have always been present, but they were never as fully developed as initially planned, especially not in the first City Deal.

I remember that during the first City Deal, we had this idealistic phrase about how the ten cities would work together with the ministries and all the food system actors in their respective territories. However, in practice, it turned out to be quite challenging. So, in the beginning, it was primarily a network of policymakers, mostly the people working within municipalities. In the new City Deal, there has been much more involvement of research institutes, with a greater focus on using the knowledge and studies from these institutions to inform the work. For example, one major study was funded by national universities, exploring the legal possibilities for regulating the location of fast-food chains and addressing issues within the physical food environment. More studies like this have come out of the second City Deal, making research a key component. There has also been collaboration with companies, particularly in the first City Deal, where several cities had a strong link with businesses. For some cities, the economic agenda was a driving force for launching local food policies, particularly to promote start-ups and foster new types of economic activities. There was significant collaboration with small and medium-sized companies rather than big corporations. One of the initiatives in the first City Deal was to map out labs and innovation hubs where start-up companies could work on new activities and production processes, with the aim of bringing those innovations to the market. The idea was that the City Deal would also have a role in developing a new, sustainable food economy.

Do you map the network?

No, not really, not explicitly.

What are the types of activities that you carry out within the network? So, for example, are there exchanges of information, best practices, advocacy activities?

Yes, it's about exchanging information, sharing best practices, and work-

ing a little bit with communities of practice. There's also been the development of certain policy areas through studies and some advocacy towards national and provincial governments. It's really about gathering and providing information, like bringing together insights on labs and innovation centers, for example. It's more or less in that direction.

About this, what methods do you use and what spaces you occupy for political expression?

Yes, advocacy also clearly happens at the level of local governments and local government networks. As I mentioned earlier, this is closely connected to the broader urban agenda, which is a key platform. Within that space, an important event is the "Day of the City," held annually in one of the cities in the Netherlands. It's a major platform where cities showcase their experiences and where advocacy is conducted, not just towards other cities but also to disseminate knowledge and encourage action.

In addition to this, there are also several national platforms that play a key role. One of them is the Association of Dutch Municipalities, which is like the Italian network of municipalities. Within this association, there are thematic working groups that address issues related to agriculture and, increasingly, food-related matters. The role of provinces has also been important. The connection between municipalities and provinces, like what you might see in Italy, is often crucial for getting policies moving at both the local and regional levels.

In the first City Deal, it was interesting because the focus was mostly on municipalities, creating a network of cities. But behind the scenes, a sort of shadow network of provincial representatives also began to emerge, where they started exchanging ideas. This laid the foundation for new networks and collaborations, with provinces beginning to develop their own food agendas and policies. At the national level, there's also an effort to get food policy back on the agenda, although this remains a significant

challenge in the current political climate.

Then one last question: which tools in terms of websites, social channels, events you developed or implemented?

Yes, we also had a website during the first City Deal where different best practices were shared. It was called the “Recipe Book”—a kind of recipe book for local food policies. Now, with the second City Deal, there’s a new approach using a magazine.

Additionally, there was a mapping project of innovation centers and laboratories where companies could collaborate, which resulted in an actual map. This might also be relevant to your earlier question. Furthermore, there has been work on indicators, though I’m not entirely sure how far that has progressed. In the last City Deal, there was some effort to develop indicators, somewhat linked to the work on the Milan Food Policy Pact indicators. The city of Ede was one of the pilot cities for this effort. It’s been a topic of discussion, although I’m not sure about the current status.