

Governing at Scale: Successful Local Food Initiatives in the World's Cities

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Abstract: To introduce the special issue on local food initiatives in the world's cities, this editorial examines the role of scale and the governance of local food initiatives in cities. The seven papers in this issue focus variously on food system governance at the scales of metropolitan regions, neighborhoods, households, and individual consumers. Although local food initiatives must work to overcome structural challenges operating at global and national scales, as delineated in key literature on food systems, taken together, the seven articles suggest that more sustainable outcomes are possible if local initiatives embrace change across multiple scales.

Keywords: local food systems; alternative food networks; urban governance; scale

1. Scale and the Governance of Local Food Initiatives

This special issue examines key issues and challenges pertaining to the governance of local food initiatives in the world's cities. As noted by scholars [1–5], a range of institutions across scales manage the processes of food production, distribution, acquisition, consumption, and waste in cities.

These includes national, provincial, and local government departments and agencies; for-profit food businesses, manufacturers, processors, retailers, restaurants, corner stores, and informal street vendors; and non-governmental, community-based, and social-movement organizations. Although institutions at all scales are critical, local food initiatives are increasingly noted as sustainability solutions for food systems.

However, as noted by the authors in this special issue, local institutions are often constrained significantly by political, economic, and social pressures at national and global scales [6–8]. Depending on the context, these structural processes may include the legacies of colonialism and underdevelopment; persistent social, racial, and class inequality; malnutrition, health crises, and extreme food poverty; and the political economy of the corporate food retailing industry, financial speculation, and other capitalist imperatives associated with the global food system. In the face of such constraints, shifts toward the local—the devolution, decentralization, and privatization of food governance to local and non-governmental organizations—come with the risk of reinforcing unsustainable practices, as noted by key scholars [9,10]. These dynamics have been examined extensively in critical urban political ecology and political economy research, which aims to analyze the complex urban governance regimes that operate in cities [11–14]. All of these different structural processes intersect at the local level and either enable or constrain the capacity of local institutions to successfully provide food which is affordable, accessible, and nutritious for people in communities. These institutional challenges suggest that food policy and food governance need to recognize and

respond to challenges at multiple scales since communities are shaped by a range of factors beyond the local context [15,16].

Given that the governance of food systems is a critical and emerging challenge in urban regions across the world [17], it is notable that the seven papers in this issue primarily focus on food system governance at the urban and metropolitan scales; community and neighborhood scales; and, household and individual consumer scales. Importantly, while local food initiatives must contend with the national and global factors as noted in the literature on food system sustainability, papers in this special journal issue suggest that more sustainable outcomes are possible if local initiatives embrace change across multiple scales (i.e., beyond the local).

To start, at the metropolitan and urban scale, Orttung et al. [18] examined the effectiveness of a collaborative, multi-stakeholder food policy building process in the case of Fairbanks North Star Borough in Alaska. Through their analysis, the authors illustrate the utility and challenges of building a truly representative body that includes local farmers, distributors, consumers, activists, and academics. Similarly, Jablonski et al. [19] explored the value of connecting urban food plans in Denver to the surrounding rural areas. By developing a common vision through a highly participatory process, both cities were able to create a food system framework with significant buy-in by a range of stakeholders. This process provides some insight and optimism for other metropolitan areas working through many of the same practical questions around food system governance.

At the community and neighborhood scale, two papers in the special issue point out the importance of connecting between specific sites of activity. Siegner et al. [20] analyzed the impact that urban agriculture has had on communities, especially in lower-income neighborhoods. Through a systematic literature review, the study finds that the scale and location of farming sites influence the success of urban agriculture. In addition, Pitt et al. [21] highlight the value that Food Growing Schools London (FGSL) plays in community development through the increased collaboration, networking, and sharing of information within and between schools and other local institutions in the city. While both of these papers illustrate how programs can be limited by factors beyond their control, such as government policy and structural dynamics in the global food system, they also illustrate how innovation at the micro-scale can be scaled-up when connections are made across sites of activity.

At the scale of households and individual consumers, two papers point out that consumer choice and consumer behavior must be carefully examined considering how choices and behaviors are shaped by factors at larger spatial scales. On the one hand, Warshawsky's study [22] on the limits of food waste governance in Los Angeles points out that consumers' desire to reduce food waste is foiled by a lack of infrastructure for donating food or processing organics at the scale of the city. On the other hand, Resano and Sanjuán's study [23] suggests that consumer preferences associated with autochthonous breed certification might be harnessed to increase demand and systems for more sustainably produced beef in the European Union. While both papers highlight how local impact is shaped by broader social factors pertaining to the governance of urban food systems at higher scales, consumers are also shown to have a significant impact on structural processes within the global food system. Consumer choice and individual perspectives of local food sustainability shape how companies and governments market products and process their waste within their food streams.

Lastly, and most hopefully, Brinkley [24] examines the seemingly improbable success of alternative food networks in Baltimore County, Maryland. Given the size and strength of global food system actors, Brinkley shows that cultural values, social networks, and local markets help to sustain alternative food systems. Through the use of social network analysis, Brinkley [24] visualizes the complex interactions of farms and markets in the county, including their locations, and depicts hundreds of connections among them. Importantly, she suggests that the local food system in Baltimore thrives in the face of global challenges, because of the numerous close connections between growers, distributors, and retailers across the scales of the urban, peri-urban, and rural places of Baltimore County. This finding, using very different sorts of methods, resonates clearly with the findings of Orttung et al. and Jablonski et al. [18,19] on the importance of connecting local food systems across urban regions.

While it is easy to dismiss the impact of local food initiatives as negligible given their small place within the global food system, the authors in this special journal issue suggest that successful initiatives at the urban, community, and consumer level may have a broader impact. Local creativity and innovation may be significant when they are supported by governance at interconnected spatial scales. Such connections reinforce the success of local initiatives, and highly marketed success stories at local scales may be promoted and replicated extensively elsewhere.

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