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EDITED AND REVIEWED BY
Amy M. Lerner,
University of California, San Diego,
United States

*CORRESPONDENCE
Sofia Nikolaidou
✉ nikolaidou.sofia@ac.eap.gr

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Editorial: New directions in governance of urban food systems transitions

Sofia Nikolaidou^{1*}, Salma Loudiyi^{2,3} and Rachel Reckinger⁴

¹School of Social Sciences, Hellenic Open University, Patras, Greece, ²VetAgro Sup, UMR (Unité Mixte de Recherches) 1273 Territoires, Clermont-Ferrand, France, ³VetAgro Sup, Lyon, France, ⁴Department of Humanities, Faculty of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, University of Luxembourg, Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg

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Editorial on the Research Topic

New directions in governance of urban food systems transitions

Ecological, socioeconomic and public health-related challenges on how we produce, distribute and consume food is of increasing concern and highlights the need for transitioning to more sustainable and just food systems. In the wake of a global crisis, cities and their peripheries are facing rapid urbanization, population increase and the pressing issues around unequal food access, food poverty and insecurity, climate change, and democracy. Bottom-up, values-based territorial movements create alternative local food supply networks and seek policy options that enable access to healthy, fair, diversified, qualitative yet affordable food for all citizens. Addressing vulnerabilities of urban food systems also entails, for local authorities, complex ways of rethinking agri-food production as a way to ensure sustainable urban environments and rural-urban food networks that feed local populations. Strengthening rural-urban food networks that feed local populations becomes part of the urban sustainability and resilience discourse which is aiming to affect governance and policy reforms.

The goal of this Research Topic is to focus on food policy reforms, planning initiatives and new governance models involving public engagement and the inclusion of relevant stakeholders such as civil society into the decision-making processes that are required for a transition to more sustainable agri-food systems and daily practices.

The articles in this Research Topic unfold the diverse contexts of governing food systems through a wide range of initiatives, models of emerging alternatives and related policies at urban and regional scales: Food Policy Councils, Food Assemblies, Short Food Supply Chains, City-Region Food Systems, urban gardening projects and public school-food schemes are some of the cases that illustrate how urban food systems link rural and urban communities, help relocalize production and better connect producers with consumers, while entering into new dialogues with local governance structures. Core concepts that lead urban food system transitions are mainly centered around food system sustainability, more globally sustainability transitions, food democracy, and participatory governance with a strong co-creation dimension resulting from interaction among multiple food chain actors. Though the case-studies are different, there are certain common threads that emerge from this cross-perspective.

Policy discourses and planning approaches within the rural-urban spectrum

A first approach places attention on the re-framing of the urban food system in the context of city-regions. This approach focuses on enhanced connectivity between urban, peri-urban and adjacent rural communities, connecting them through food production, processing, distribution and marketing. Small scale-farming viability and preservation of agricultural land are key factors that promote food security and nutrition through short food supply chains at the regional level (Säumel et al.). This agri-urban approach is actively promoted in the context of a more balanced territorial development that seeks a resilient food system transition to food sovereignty at the regional level through a strong, diverse and sustainable local food economy with more equal and just access to food (more affordable, smaller distances, lower food miles, less food waste and packaging, reduces urban sprawl etc.).

Against this backdrop, contributions of Jahrl et al. and Jules et al. highlight the vibrancy of urban food initiatives and policy interventions at the city scale (i.e. collective urban gardens and city farmland) that represent a multifunctional land-use strategy within an urban sustainability context (multiple social, ecological, and economic challenges in providing various ecosystem services) by placing food production in a subordinate role. Through the example of Toulouse (France), Jules et al. emphasize in their article the ability of urban agriculture to transform the conventional use and functions of open green and public space and to create ‘spaces of freedom’ that enhance citizen awareness and the quality of life. In this regard, Jahrl et al. show how small-scale community gardens are favored within Swiss cities as low-cost and multifunctional urban greening tools relying on voluntary citizen participation, and as assets for “quality of life” and city attractiveness. Notwithstanding this policy approach is implemented in the context of urban densification and the promotion of compact cities, protecting agricultural land constitutes another line of argument to prevent urban sprawl which shows that urban and rural areas remain linked by numerous ecological, social and economic processes of food systems (Jahrl et al.). However, this renegotiation of land access creates temporary open spaces that are made available by urban regeneration processes.

At a broader scale, and through the example of Paris and Sao Paulo metropolis, Retière and Darly show how public policies enhancing sustainable and local school food procurement can be seen as a way to scale up impacts of innovations on agricultural and food landscapes. However, the authors warn that this transformative impact can be low, given the small amount of land involved in these processes and the invariably slow effect of sustainable food policies on diversification of agricultural models around the cities. All of these case studies indicate that governance structures and models are critical to “deep” agriculture and food transitions.

New hybrid multi-actor governance models: co-creating local food systems transition

The regional scale seems to be a promising governance unit at territorial scale that incorporates a complex decision-making network of food system actors (including citizens) and policy makers, relations and processes of a geographically limited food chain that are proximate (both socially and geographically) to production, processing, distribution and consumption. Three papers (Petropoulou and Paschou, Michel et al., and Säumel et al.) highlight food systems interventions (that vary from communities of knowledge and practice, to Food Policy Councils, Food Assemblies, and City-Region Food Systems) which are developed and implemented in partnership with different public-private stakeholders, requiring cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder cooperation at the city-region scale. Such new governance structures entail implementation of a more integrated approach to rural-urban development that bring together local and regional authorities, national government actors, private sector and civil society (Michel et al.). At the city scale, urban gardens (Jahrl et al.) can also open promising opportunities for hybrid modes of governance that entail multi-actor approaches with participatory practices that enhance the potential of civil society in urban green space management. Michel et al. show how the very methods and processes of such shared governance innovations require scientific scrutiny, to assess their added-value and common difficulties for optimized food sustainability and inclusive food democracy. To go beyond mere ‘promises’ of food system change, academia’s role is particularly critical, by offering procedural insights on how innovative and participative initiatives feed into theory of sustainable food systems and food democracy.

In sum, on the one hand, bottom-up initiatives across all case studies seek policy options for affordable and healthy food through alternative food strategies and innovative SFSCs (e.g., Food Policy Councils/Assemblies, farmers’ markets, on-farm sales, Community Supported Agriculture etc.) through negotiating a more active participation in decision making. On the other hand, local production of food is increasingly being supported by local and regional authorities that seek to improve urban-rural linkages and ensure participation of small producers and local actors in the city-region, exploiting urban challenges and opportunities for sustainable food (e.g., Food Policy Councils, school food procurement). Co-creative processes challenge administration and the traditional planning methods, by including citizen participation and multiple food actors—with differing if not competing agendas and varying scopes of power—within the agri-food processes. Participation and democratization point out the inadequacies of sectoral approaches and the need for integrated management in a thriving food democracy with inclusive deliberative food governance tools, in order to address system transitions, while close attention has to be paid to dynamics of recuperation of discourses, of co-option, of cimentation of existing power gaps.

To conclude, a critical and inclusive governance of the transition toward sustainable urban food systems refers to the capacity of food systems to:

- enhance multi-functionality of urban and agricultural landscapes with special focus on social cohesion and quality of life in the agri-food system,
- create innovative and just food systems structured around organizational relationships and interaction of participating multiple-actor networks,
- give new perspectives for participatory approaches that enact actors' engagement and co-creation practices/processes, in order to improve viability in territorial food networks striving to enact common values,
- conduct a (auto-) critical reflection on the transformative power of these processes, by giving itself the means to conduct evaluations based on (participative) metrics and qualitative analyses of exemplary actions, in order to transparently monitor possible changes among the involved multi-stakeholders.

Author contributions

SN was responsible for the overall planning of the Research Topic and took the lead in writing the initial draft of the editorial by presenting the ideas and concepts of all contributing articles. SL

and RR equally contributed to the review and editing process and provided critical feedback that enriched the findings of the editorial. All authors discussed together the results and contributed to the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

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