



Policy, Plates, and Planet: Actions to catalyze urban food system transformation

Cities are enablers of food system transformation

Responsible for 70% of global CO₂ emissions, cities must lead the way to ambitious changes. To reach 1.5 °C degree alignment, the urban food system must reduce consumption-based emissions (CBE) and deliver co-benefits to health, the economy, biodiversity and social inequality. In 2017, C40 found urban food-related carbon emissions to be equal to [13% of CBE](#) in C40 cities. With no action, these emissions from agriculture, processing, transport and food waste could increase by 38% by 2050. Using a systemic urban food system approach, local governments and urban stakeholders can accelerate climate action and social justice.

Cities are centers of food consumption, endpoints of food production, trendsetters of choice, and producers of food waste. Consequently, food in the urban space exerts an influence on all socio-environmental systems, the most impactful areas for intervention being diets and waste. This offers an opportunity for mayors, local policymakers and key stakeholders to lead and convene collaborative, integrated policies that use the power of urban areas to reform the food system and make it more sustainable and resilient.

To make equitable, diverse and low-carbon urban food systems a reality, local governments and their allies require increased maneuverability to be regulators, enablers and promoters of sustainable urban food systems. Policymakers can co-create multi-stakeholder governance mechanisms (such as food policy councils) that address food-related challenges through evidence-based planning and institutional processes. Global frameworks can accelerate the creation of sustainable urban food systems by positioning cities as action labs for food systems innovation and create scalable solutions. Vertically, national governments may look to city initiatives for inspiration while also providing support, funding and the coordination of GHG reduction targets throughout governance levels. Horizontally, city silos can be broken to work with food as a multi-sectoral issue, coordinating across city departments and with stakeholders to include the informal sector, private sector, civil society organizations (CSOs) and citizen councils.

Challenges

1. The urban food system is not seen as systemic or cross-cutting. Therefore, it is not a political priority, is insufficiently funded, and local governments lack food mandates.
2. National food policies are not vertically integrated nor align with global frameworks, such as the SDGs. They often limit municipal priorities to create localized, healthy and equitable food systems.
3. Effective engagement mechanisms that connect local governments and certain stakeholders (e.g. CSOs, private sector, research organizations) to those with less capacity to participate are often lacking, resulting in potential conflicts of interests or power imbalances.
4. Large, context-specific data gaps exist on socio-environmental aspects (e.g. GHG emissions, nutrition, biodiversity impacts, eutrophication, waste, foodscapes, water use connected to consumption) throughout the food system, especially at the local level, making it difficult to identify leverage points.
5. Nutritious and healthy food is not equally accessible. Inequitable distribution, lack of purchasing power and expensive prices, combined with supermarket domination and lucrative marketing of unhealthy food to vulnerable populations, create a harmful urban food environment.
6. Urban infrastructure and planning largely do not ensure equitable access to sustainable food, nor facilitate bottom-up solutions (e.g. informal vendors, markets, peri-urban agriculture) to fill this gap.
7. Nutrient flows in the urban food system are linear and lack circular thinking. Agricultural inputs are wasted in urban sanitation systems and dispersed, causing environmental degradation, while chemical dependency in food production grows. Without a closed loop system, opportunities for resource efficiency and soil fertility are missed.

WWF Invites

Local Governments to:

- Map food system actors in a city's wider metropolitan region, identifying entry points for policy development using system-based problem framing, while prioritizing marginalized communities.
- Evaluate existing local food policies, frameworks, investments and resources to collect and consolidate impactful actions and integrate urban food system solutions into existing priorities.
- Convene diverse stakeholder platforms with those involved throughout the urban food system to develop policy and programming. Use participatory processes to tackle power imbalances and ensure idea generation and ownership.
- Design local food policies that support healthy and sustainable diets, reduce food waste and transform food supply chains, while integrating policies into local climate action planning and ensuring a balance between urban and rural interests. To do so, collaborate with peri-urban areas and regional authorities to advance investment in agricultural jobs and education that is beneficial for people and the planet.
- Create procurement plans that prioritize locally-appropriate guidance on [Planet-Based Diets](#) that integrate health, equity and environment to increase consumption of healthy food made with sustainable ingredients, produced within planetary boundaries, and adapted to local contexts, including a larger proportion of plant-based foods where appropriate.
- Foster citizen engagement and work with schools (e.g. principals, teachers, canteens, students) to increase Planet-Based procurement and support design learning on a Whole School Food Approach.
- Enhance urban-rural linkages to shorten supply chains, through urban and peri-urban agriculture, farmers' markets, producer-consumer networks and inclusion of rural stakeholders in policy discussions.

National and Regional Governments to:

- Evaluate existing food policies and investments directed at urban and peri-urban areas to integrate urban food system solutions into national priorities and recommendations (e.g. on climate, nature and health).
- Enable policy development mechanisms that coordinate decision-making on food systems across multiple governance levels, equalizing voices, while recognizing trade-offs and abilities to participate.
- Develop inclusive national food policies that include a rights-based approach to food and effectively address its climate and environmental impacts, for example with the inclusion of food in the revision of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for climate change and climate action planning frameworks.
- Release [Planet-Based Diets](#)-aligned national procurement guidelines that prioritize affordable, seasonal, nutritious and sustainably produced food, using agro-ecological principles within planetary boundaries, adapted to local contexts. Encourage procurement of Planet-Based foods across governance levels
- Increase access to healthy food for vulnerable populations by using social protections, while recognizing specific beliefs, cultures, traditions and dietary habits of diverse communities, and integrating relevant food policy interventions into social safety nets and cash transfer redistributive policies.
- Support schools that implement a [Whole School Food Approach](#), working with food quality, food leadership, food culture, food education and engaging community and partnerships.
- Eliminate restrictions and provide guidance, training and financial assistance to cities and regions to support food producers, vendors and farmers' markets for economically-viable circularity.

International Institutions to:

- Advocate for national governments to understand the role of urban governments, regional governments, and citizen initiatives to deliver GHG emission reductions through sustainable urban food systems, that provide co-benefits (e.g. biodiversity and ecosystem regeneration, resilience, circular thinking, access to healthy and sustainable diets for all, equity improvements and the creation of resilient livelihoods).
- Recognize that food systems perpetuate inequitable dynamics, while contributing 21-37% to global carbon emissions, encouraging national governments to reduce inequalities and emissions.

WWF Cities

WWF Cities coordinates local government and urban stakeholder engagement. Over 600 cities have joined WWF, namely via the One Planet City Challenge, which supports cities to align to 1.5 °C while fostering co-benefits, including on nature conservation, equity and healthier cities.