

# The role of informal food networks. Notes from the experience of Milan toward food policy councils

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## ABSTRACT

The Urban Food Policies are one of the most challenging contexts to meet the needs of an urbanized world. These issues are already out of the pioneering phase: there are many experiences around the world and, one of the issues that has emerged in about twenty years of growth and consolidation of these policies concerns the role of the local social actors and strengthening their ability to build new public arenas. This topic is important since a systemic approach to food requires integration between different areas of policy and, therefore, the rethinking of the roles of the actors that are connected to each of these areas of policy.

Similarly, an Urban Food Policy also requires a reconfiguration of the roles of the local institution that, in many contexts around the world, rarely has a institutionally recognized role on issues of food. Then identifying new public arenas therefore means to strengthen the capability to integrate both “food related issues” and other innovative approaches to public action.

On the basis of the recent experience of the Milan Food Policy the paper argues how, the possibility to create a comprehensive frame for an Urban Food Policy is more effective - and possible - through the empowerment of non-mainstream productions and activities, establishing a suitable institutional framework in order to switch from sectorial policies to more complex approaches that can incorporate different issues values.

## 1. The context of the Urban Food Policy of Milan

At the beginning of 2014 the Municipality of Milan has launched a series of activities to define an urban food policy that integrates in a comprehensive framework many issues that are directly and indirectly connected with food. It is not a policy only about urban agriculture or about the aspects that are connected to consumption and nutrition, because the perspective is to define priorities that are related to the whole food cycle (production, processing, distribution, trade, consumption, waste and recycling) and to the social, economic and environmental issues that are affected by the food cycle: demographics, welfare, connected economies, input and output of stocks and energy, ecological footprint, etc.

From the point of view of the actions that are outlined by the urban food policy of Milan, the geographical context refers particularly to the municipality and its administrative boundaries but, when considering the scale of reference of the analysis, a lot of issues have been considered at the metropolitan or regional scale. This is because a lot of food issues that related to a city like Milan can only be analyzed and understood at a larger scale.

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<sup>1</sup> ESTà is a non profit think tank that works to promote the culture of a socially and environmentally sustainable economy. ESTà collaborates with institutions, as well as social and economic actors by providing strategic support, researches, training, coaching, communication and networking services. ESTà operates with a local approach to development and sustainability, supporting small communities as well as international organizations and institutions.

The Milanese context is a complex system of very dense settlements and, secondly, the territory is characterized by elements of excellence in agricultural production. The City of Milan is part of the Parco Agricolo Sud Milano (South Milan Agricultural Park), that includes 88 municipalities, that is the largest agricultural park in Europe as well as being the first to be founded. Beside this, the Milan area is now experiencing an important institutional change that is associated with the process of establishing the Metropolitan Area, replacing the previous Provincia (district) and that, potentially, could bring some institutional changes concerning the policies connected to food.

In the following pages the experience of Milan is used as a background reference to contextualize ideas and approaches that are carried on and observed in a lot of other experiences at local and global level within the context of social movements and local citizens initiatives.

## **2. New public arenas for new policies**

The elements that can be used to build an urban strategy linked to food are declined in different ways depending on the context, because the food cycles are intimately connected to each place; depending on environmental conditions, on the territorial feature and on the peculiarities of social organizations and the economies.

This activity of contextualization covers both the specific contents of an urban food policy, and the institutional forms that these policies may have in a local perspective. Therefore it is crucial to consider not only the general contents of the policies that are related to food (productivity, prices, nutrition, etc.) or to consider the peculiarities of the "urban needs," but also to decline this contents and these needs within the system of actors that are part of a particular context.

The definition of policy issues - environment, production, nutrition, welfare, etc - depends, in fact, on the types and configuration of the actors moving on the scene around the food issues and not only on the initial setting that is proposed by the promoter of the policy. In other words, the possibility of the city government to effectively influence the urban food system depends on its capability to mobilize those actors who brings contents at the urban level, to work on their perception of the relevance of the *food needs* and on their interests. Finally, it depends also on the capability to define new public spaces for dialogue to transform these perceptions, these interests and these needs into shared choices that can be referred to the local context.

This is particularly important in all the policy areas that are not consolidated in the existing institutional systems, including those that are related to urban and regional food system. These policy areas, in fact, requires a discussion and an integration process that has to affect a number of policies that currently are handled in a sectorial way (production, trade, environment, land, etc.) and various institutional levels. Beside this, most of the food policies do not consider the urban and metropolitan context as a specific object of interest, even if the global food system depends to a large extent on the urban ways of life that are shaping an *urbanized world*.

The clearest example of the absence of urban issues in the discussions related to food is the "agricultural side" of the food system. Urban issues are not usually considered in agricultural negotiations at the international level and, in the European Union, agricultural policies are regulated, determined and managed at European, national and regional level and not at the local level. Beside this, there is a clear privilege for rural

contexts more than having urban perspectives, and cities are usually considered as end markets and not as an object of specific actions. This approach depends on the fact that, before speaking about urban food policies, generally food policies does not exist, but only agricultural policies, trade policies, transport policies, etc.

Using these considerations as baseline, the paper focuses on the observation of the dynamics between those actors who act in the context of Milan while elaborating their strategies of aggregation in an innovative way to manage issues that are related to components of the food system. The observation of these actors can facilitate the definition of some indications for a theoretical and methodological approach that can help to understand whether and to what extent such types of coalitions of new “food actors” can be a resource to manage the challenges connected to an *urban approach to food*.

### **3. Grassroot actors and food movements**

In recent years new “food actors” have emerged in the context of Milan, occupying and defining new cultural and public spaces in connection with food issues and working at the urban level.

The most diffused type of these actors is a large galaxy of micro-initiatives that refer essentially to the principles of solidarity economy and sustainable lifestyles. These initiatives have generated different forms of informal coalitions that focus on the enhancement of quality local food, the direct relationship between producer and consumer and the importance of human relations in economic exchanges.

In Milan and its surrounding area, at the beginning of 2000s a lot of grassroots experiences begun to develop to promote direct links between production and consumption in which the relationship between town and country was an important factor. In 2002 was founded the first network of Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (GAS – solidarity purchasing groups), which are groups of families (from 15 to 100 families for each purchasing group) who organize themselves to buy food directly from producers, defining features and price of the products referring on criteria of quality, sustainability and ethical production. The GAS are a phenomenon that was born in Italy in the early 90s and can be identified as the Italian declination of what is defined Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in the Anglo-Saxon context and something similar to the AMAPs (Association pour le Maintien de l'Agriculture Paysanne) in the French-speaking world.

In the city of Milan about 80 GAS are currently surveyed approximately and, at the metropolitan level, there are around 150 groups. While considering these data we have to compare them with the existing studies that have been made in different Italian regions and that estimate that, in each territory, the number of surveyed GAS (or belonging to any organized network) are about half of the real total.

On the basis of the dynamics that have been briefly summarized above, for years a significant number of projects has been developed to create networks among these experiences of socioeconomic self-organization and to upscale these experiences and in the perspective of stimulating new fields of public action. Most part of these initiatives have been significantly supported by Fondazione Cariplo, the largest Italian philanthropic foundation, that has the mission to support actions on culture, welfare, research and environment throughout the Lombardy Region, of which Milan is the

capital city. Fondazione Cariplo has funded several researches and on field projects that are based on social networks, on other forms of self-organized actions that are sometimes co-promoted through partnership with local institutions (GAS networks, farmers markets, community gardens, social horticulture, etc).

Currently, in the metropolitan area, there are dozens of farms that sell directly to GAS with stable partnerships. On this basis, since the mid-2000s there was also a process to create the so called Districts of Social Economy (DES), which arise as coalitions of GAS, farms and other actors that are oriented to act under the principles of solidarity economy (ethical banks, microcredit actors, fair trade initiatives, etc.) with the purpose to promote new forms of local economy with solidarity principles. Their structure is often informal and they are characterized as networks connected to specific territories

This is only a part of the experiences of *informal public policies* that, in the Milan area, have raised the attention of a significant percentage of the city population. Furthermore, starting from the first half of 2000s a series of action/researches that were conducted by research groups alongside social networks have produced some scenarios to support the development of local networks producers and consumers; trying also to highlight the potential effects of these networks on institutional policies to the metropolitan scale.

These experiences were the vehicle to facilitate the convergence between sustainable consumption practices, different cultural sensitivities, the effects of the economic and environmental crisis, the emersion of new forms of social relationship based on social and solidarity economies and other trends that show a real chance to connect a number of food issues with the social the urban context. After years in which these dynamics have been generated and fed into social processes, some institutional attentions are emerging in the process of changing the current state of substantial separation between territorial, agricultural and rural policies.

#### **4. From grassroots initiatives to public policies**

In this rich and varied context, the “lacking connections” are usually the public bodies that have some difficulties to understand if and how to promote specific policies concerning citizens' initiatives. This *lacking connections* generates a great variety of experiments, events and pilot project that are promoted by public bodies. But what really happens is that those projects are often connected more to the political initiative of a local leader than to an ordinary and well structured policy with a real possibility to be sustainable in a medium-long time. This situation is less evident in the contexts where the consolidation of public policies has been possible thanks to the combination between a good capability of public actors to innovate their processes of public interaction and a good organization of the social networks, but this *lacking connection* has to be considered as a very diffused status all over the world.

We can say that a lot of the needs that are expressed in the citizens initiatives connected to food are:

- not yet adequately represented in public arenas;
- not often considered by institutional policies in their deep meaning.

The combinations of all these actors and mutual dynamics brings out a general consideration concerning the capability of these networks to become objects of public

policies. This universe of experiences is complex due to the fact that they manage unexpressed needs of different nature and involve very different actors that are hardly be defined in the traditional rigid “social” or “economical” frames that grew up in Modernity (e.g. omnicomprehensive mass associations, business actors, etc.). Consequently, the capability of the public bodies to work in the contexts of these networks is connected to the capability to recognize them in their specificities.

From the point of view of the needs, a fundamental problem to draw and to implement public policies to support citizens initiatives is that all of them brings together something that could be defined as “cluster of needs”. In other words, these actions are carried on while managing together different issues and needs that are considered as a part of a whole and not as a sum of sectors or elements that are disconnected each other. For example in most part of the local solidarity partnerships among producers and organized consumers (like the GAS), the networks organize themselves to guarantee income to farmers, to protect the health of consumers, to educate the taste, to raise the transparency of supply chains, to increase the environmental sustainability, to reduce transportation costs and the resulting pollution, to ensure the existence of agriculture, to maintain the landscape, to characterize and differentiate agricultural products, to find guarantees to the workers, to share a more sustainable lifestyle, to live a wider concept of well-being and much more.

This *cluster of needs* represent, in some way, a sort of continuity with the past; even if there are significant differences both in the contents of the needs and, over all, in the way they are expressed, shared and satisfied.

From the traditional forms of mutual assistance that have always been in the farms and in rural villages - for example sharing tools for cultivation or the collective storage for the foodstuff – starting from the XIX century the sharing practices turned in different part of Western countries into more structured organizations. These organizations, gave legal form to a number of direct partnerships among producers and created cooperatives of production and consumption, as well as mutual aid societies and rural banks. All these forms of collective management had strong local roots and were the direct expression of the capacity of the population to set rules of coexistence in the society and in the economy. These rules were also mutually guaranteed by kind of job-sharing (joint ventures and volunteer work), self-help for the needs of health (mutual aid) and community controlled forms of savings and investment (local banks and collective lendings).

## **5. Shared values and practices**

Considering the complexities of the values and the combined effects of these practices, it is important not to see them only as *little experiences*, even if connected in wider networks. Nevertheless, if we see in a deeper way how these practices develop themselves, it must not be underestimated certain risks that are associated with the small size of the cells that are living elements these networks. Indeed, a proper assessment of the potential and limitations of these practices is necessary to understand if and how there are some opportunities to define public policies based on the empowerment of these practices with valuable effects in a long term perspective.

The small dimension of many of these practices is also due to the fact that they were born and have grown despite public policies, in a substantial lack of financial support, without an adequate regulatory framework and in a more general lack of real assessment of the relevance of a local approach to development of which local food is an important part. This consideration is crucial to compare the potential of solidarity network with the “common market”, also not considering the great differences represented by the *cluster of needs* and by the immaterial values of these economies, but only to the pure economic values that are implied.

The farmer who cultivates in periurban contexts of a large city tends to consider his work as a starting point to define in a broader sense the value of what he produces that is generated through the relation with conscious consumers, in the common search of a shared experience. This value is directly related to the intrinsic qualities of the foodstuff and to its *fair* remuneration, but includes also other types of intangible values associated with the farm work, such as the care of the land, the transmission of knowledge and the contribution to a well being context based on the daily consumption.

To describe this space of shared identity that is created between producers and consumers, from the mid-90s the concepts referred to the “consumer-citizens” or to the “co-producers” had begun to be used in Western countries, that in recent years have been diffused in wider contexts. These two definitions highlight four key aspects of local identity that are created in economic relations characterized by pacts that are developed within solidarity networks:

- the production and consumption patterns are transformed by incorporating *elements of citizenship* that put into evidence the importance of civic aspects of economic activities;
- this civic aspects are expressed in the *partecipative construction of shared social rules* that are considered as part of personal and collective daily life;
- this way of life is connected to a *territorialized idea of well being* that conceives the social relations as a part of a general care for the place of human life (culture and care of the land);
- in this perspective having care of the land tends to bring the farming activities (the *material side* of having care of the land) closer to the purchasing acts (the *ideal side* of having care);

## **6. From food issues toward food councils**

The reference to the context of the new “food actors” of the Milanese context and the interpretation of the dynamics and potential of their actions and in their developments highlights an interesting topic that can help to effectively address the urban food policies.

The interpretation of the experiences suggests that the development of the potential that is connected to these actors can only happens if an adequate attention is given not only to the contents, but also to the ways in which these contents can be defined and implemented. This due to the fact that these actors are interested to propose ways of relating content as their action. The opportunity to learn positive lessons from these actors and to transfer their innovative potential within a public policy depends,

therefore, on the ability to build adequate public arenas for these actors.

The point that is proposed here, therefore, is not (or not only) to introduce new contents for food policy, but rather to ensure adequate space representation for the "new needs of the food." In order to get this, what is important is to have a public debate which includes also different actors compared with the ones that, traditionally, are involved in policies.

With this premise, a key element to promote innovative urban food policies is not to go on with the usual division of sectoral policies, but to take advantage of the capability of those actors to connect people and issues; while creating a public space for debating that is more suited to take care of these "cluster of needs". This is a way to say that, what is important, is to represent these issues and these way of being in Local Food Councils.

These Councils were originally widespread in North America and represent a context in which local governments discuss directly with civil society on a wide range of food issues. They, however, are relatively new in Europe and, after a first experience in London that was activated in 2004, one of the first references and recognized at European level is the food council established in Bristol in 2011. Indeed, this is not of a novelty in an absolute sense, because similar institutions were created in Norway and Finland, respectively, in the late '30s and mid-50s. However, a more modern concept of food policy council has been developed in the early 80s in the United States under the pressure of different kind of social groups (well being, fight against poverty, nutrition, etc.) and has had a rapid diffusion across North America.

In many contexts, Africa and Latin America there are also many other forms of institutionalization of social debate around food as it is around the themes of food that you have generated (or regenerated) various institutions of different levels. Some of the most striking examples in this sense are represented by public discussions that, starting from the level of the villages and small towns, have led movements and groups that follow the principles of the right to food and food sovereignty even to affect substantially the review processes national constitutions of several Latin American.

Compared with the first cases, that are more focused on the issues of food security and the fight against hunger, the current food policy councils have a broader approach to policies that affect food, with a multidimensional view of the food. There is no definition or a unique pattern of food policy council because they vary depending on the local circumstances and the context that generated them. In general, we can say that the current food policy are groups of people who are variously involved in the food system (consumer associations, third sector actors, academics, business associations, institutions, etc.)

The food policy councils act as real fora to enter the food issues in the institutional agenda, to animate the debate around the theme of food and to stimulate and policies at different levels. There are different models depending on their origin, composition and relationships with institutions: there are food council that are embedded in the City Council, others are independent from institutions and there is also a number of hybrid organizations.

A food policy council is not the solution to the problems of food and not, in itself, it is

not necessarily a guarantee that we can promote and implement an innovative policy. They, rather, should be seen as a way - a precondition - to include new actors in the public arena and new needs and to avoid the mechanisms of representation that implicitly reproduce the exclusion of actors and needs that are not represented and that play a significant role in social innovation and in the process towards a more sustainable world.

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