

Building resilient food systems through local and regional governance

Report of the City Food Policy Symposium 2024



**Centre for
Food Policy**

Policy & practice to redesign
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Executive Summary

The resilience of food systems is increasingly under threat due to climate change, economic instability, and global supply chain disruptions. In response, strengthening local and regional governance has emerged as a crucial strategy to ensure food security and sustainability.

This report summarises key insights from the 2024 City Food Policy Symposium, which brought together over 200 international participants. Discussions highlighted key opportunities for local and regional organisations to foster equitable and resilient food systems. These opportunities have been grouped under the following headings.



Seek out place-specific approaches and solutions



Work strategically across multiple levels of public policy and governance



Build capacity both for short-term action and long-term planning

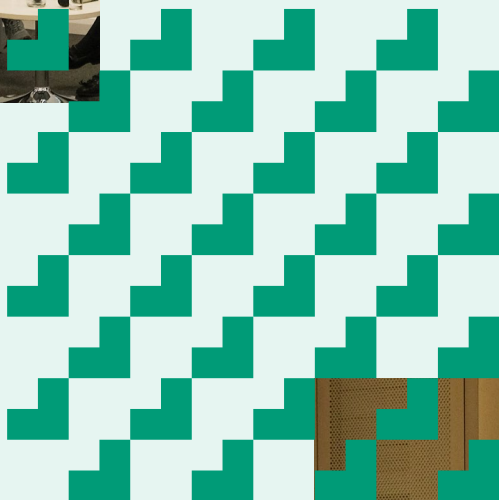


Challenge systems of oppression that marginalise groups within local food systems

We highlight the importance of diversifying supply chains, multistakeholder collaborations, and enhancing community-based food networks in achieving local and regional food systems. By fostering robust governance frameworks at local and regional levels, food systems can become more resilient to external shocks whilst ensuring equitable access to nutritious food and fairer supply chains. The report concludes with ten actions that collectively can support strong local and regional food systems, to make them more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable for the future.

Impact

Delegates reported that attending our Symposium had a positive impact on their work through new research collaborations, new publications, invitations to speak at events, widened professional networks, and encouraging engagement in further food systems learning and education.



Introduction

Our food systems continue to face significant economic, social, political, and environmental challenges.

In recent years, we have seen rising food insecurity, rapid food price inflation, and supply chain disruptions, all in the context of geopolitical conflicts and the climate emergency. The lack of resilience in our food systems has been sharply exposed.

Long-standing efforts to ensure household food security – stable access to, and the availability and affordability of, healthy and culturally appropriate foods – came under threat during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns and more recent cost-of-living crisis. The global pandemic, geopolitical crisis and climatic events have exposed the fragility of our food systems. What has emerged is an appreciation that food systems resilience requires more than the ability to ‘bounce back’; we need food systems that do not fail in the face of shocks. Preparations must be made and should ensure that those most vulnerable to the effects of shocks on our food systems are not the most negatively affected.

Around the world, local and regional initiatives have flourished in the face and aftermath of food systems shocks. These initiatives have brought about food systems change through local, urban, and territorial food policymaking. They are being led by dedicated individuals, organisations, and policymakers who are forming effective networks that respond to local needs and use regional assets. Their goals are to make food systems healthier, fairer, more environmentally sustainable, and more resilient.

The 2024 City Food Policy Symposium examined the contributions of local and regional food policy and practice to building more resilient food systems. Over 200 delegates from civil society organisations, local and national policy agencies, food industry, and academia met to share experiences of local and regional food systems change and identify opportunities for future action.



The concepts of ‘local’ and ‘regional’ can be difficult to define, especially in the context of food systems. We use these terms to refer to a range of subnational scales, which shift with social, economic, and environmental contexts. Neither corresponds with a bounded spatial area. In this report, we distinguish between the two terms only to describe ‘regional’ as agglomerations of ‘local’ initiatives.

This report provides a synthesis of the key discussions from the day. Specifically, we highlight some key lessons, ideas, and proposals put forward by speakers, facilitators, and participants across the Symposium to share with those unable to attend. We expect that this resource is of use to local and regional food policymakers and changemakers.



Figure 1. Four linked opportunities to build more equitable and more resilient local and regional food systems



Seek out place-specific approaches and solutions

The Symposium highlighted the importance of place-based learning and action for driving more resilient food systems.

Place-specific approaches and solutions refer *both* to those created for a particular set of issues, challenges, and circumstances in place *and* to approaches that emerge from local and regional conditions. Seeking out place-specific solutions means recognising that resilient food systems need to be diverse and capitalise on local assets.

The need for diverse, place-sensitive approaches

Resilient food systems must be adaptable to the specific needs and conditions of different localities. What works in one area may not be effective in another location. Adopting different approaches responds to variations in climate and changing climatic conditions, economic opportunities and constraints, cultural or community needs and preferences and available infrastructure, alongside many other factors.

Fariyah Choudhury, Southwark Council's Policy Officer for School Food and School Meals Transformation, pointed out that community needs can vary greatly within local areas as well as between areas. In Southwark, for example, nearly 40% of children live in relative poverty, but there are also areas of affluence in other parts of the borough. In this context, a diversity of targeted policies and strategies – rather than one-size-fits-all or community-wide approaches – are needed to bring about meaningful change for all residents.

Variation within and between places demands a range of responses to create resilient food systems. As Dr. Jane Battersby, Associate Professor at the African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town, stated:

“A diverse system is a pathway to resilience.”

Diversity in food production, distribution, and governance ensures that food systems can withstand shocks and stresses, such as unanticipated climatic events and supply chain disruptions.

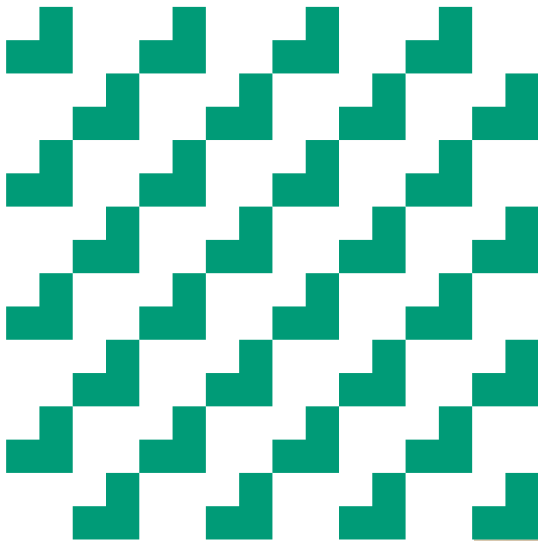


Local authorities, community organisations, and regional businesses can tailor solutions by supporting local food producers, enhancing local food procurement in public institutions, and encouraging community-led initiatives that align with local needs. For example, food partnerships in Birmingham, Brighton, Bristol, and Sheffield have brought together multiple local stakeholders to create policies that reflect the unique dynamics of each region. By fostering solutions on this scale, local authorities can support the emergence of food systems that respond to the needs of their communities, whilst mitigating against shocks.

This collaborative approach can represent a challenge for public policymakers. They are under pressure to identify and implement only the most cost- and time-effective solutions that deliver high productivity and efficient results. Diversifying approaches could include supporting food policies, programmes and initiatives that may be overlapping in terms of mandate and delivery. This tapestry of activity could involve funding multiple emergency food providers to ensure that food supply is not impacted if one organisation ceases to operate. In Cape Town, for example, there are over forty programmes in operation that directly or indirectly shape regional food systems. A diversified regional approach could also mean supporting some initiatives that are likely to see immediate results and others that are unlikely to see impacts for many years. For example, issuing contracts to procure local food from large, well-established producers and providers alongside smaller scale, new entrant farms and food businesses.

Leverage local strengths

Building on existing relationships and networks is essential for strengthening food systems resilience. Many communities already have committed organisations addressing food insecurity, harnessing sustainable agriculture, and ensuring equitable food access. Recognising and supporting these grassroots efforts ensures that change is rooted in local knowledge and engagement. Anna Taylor, Executive Director of the Food Foundation, highlighted the opportunities that can emerge from working closely with local institutions that are already aiming to deliver food systems change. She described how the Phoenix Project in Lewes, UK, for example, is embedding food into its housing development plans. The aim of this initiative is to build new, more sustainable communities that support the health and wellbeing of the local population. Similarly, the University of Kent has included the Right to Food into its broader operational plans, with the aim of preventing food insecurity and enabling all students and staff to eat well.



Overcoming the efficiency-resilience tradeoff

One of the biggest challenges in transitioning to resilient food systems is the perceived tension between efficiency and resilience. Emily O'Brien of the Green Party articulated this dilemma, noting that:

"Resilience and efficiency are kind of opposites, aren't they? Our whole food system, our whole food economy, particularly around retail...is all about a straight-line supply chain that is as efficient as possible: A to B, minimal redundancy, minimal duplication. Whereas resilience is a big net with lots of nodes...It's about duplication and spreading out. These are opposite approaches. What we need in a way is to be less efficient, but no politician can ever say that."

The development of diversified, place-based approaches to food systems offers an opportunity to reframe the dichotomy between efficiency and resilience. It moves towards more value-based approaches to food systems governance that are inherently more resilient.





Work strategically across multiple levels of public policy and governance

The challenges facing contemporary food systems range from climate change to unhealthy food environments to food insecurity.

Building resilience, then, demands coordinated action across multiple levels of governance. Whilst national policies provide important overarching frameworks, local and regional authorities play a crucial role in driving practical change and innovation. Local authorities and community organisations can deliver change rapidly, trial new approaches, and foster grassroots momentum. Regional collaborations can strengthen these efforts by fostering cross-jurisdictional learning and advocacy, and pooling resources for more significant action.

The local level: a crucible for change

One of the most significant advantages of local-level food systems action is the ability to act quickly. Local authorities and community organisations are not bound by slow-moving national policymaking processes. This situation enables them to be more agile in experimenting with new food production models, distribution networks, and policy interventions. As Sofia Parente, former Head of Local Action at Sustain, noted:

“At a local level innovation can happen rapidly without the constraints of national policy and processes that take decades to come to a conclusion.”

The flexibility cities, local authorities, and regional organisations have enables rapid implementation of food systems initiatives that prioritise sustainability and equity, such as urban agriculture programs, food hubs, and local procurement policies.

Local authorities can also act as initiators of larger-scale change. Small but strategic interventions at the community level can generate public engagement and political support, laying the groundwork for broader national reforms. As Anna Taylor highlighted:

“The role that local authorities have is that of flag bearers for action, which they can take in a small way, but which builds momentum for national change and for a bigger lever to be pulled at the national level. It’s a quiet revolution that’s happening in local areas.”

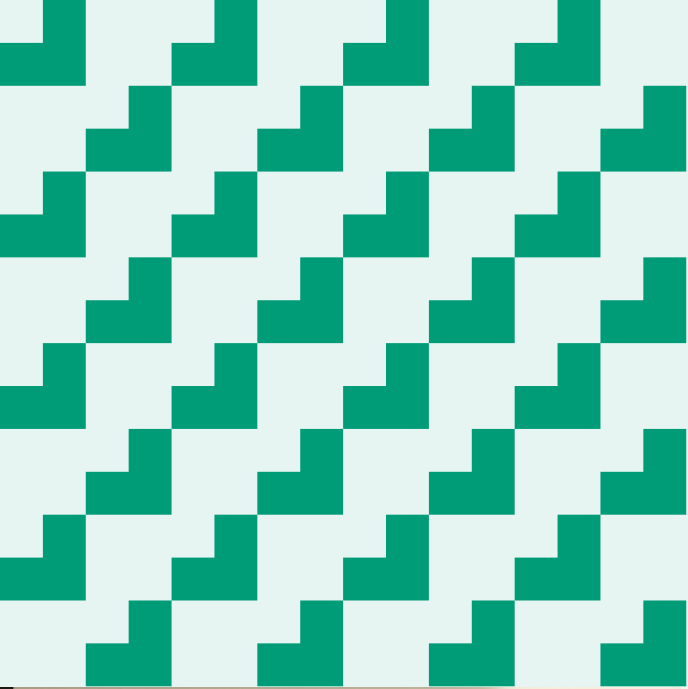
Examples of such initiatives include the development of local food charters, public procurement of local produce, banning local junk food advertising, and integrating healthy food access strategies into urban planning.

Scaling up, scaling out: the power of regional collaboration

Whilst local-level actions are vital, scaling these efforts through regional collaboration can amplify their impact. Moving beyond individual localities to regional networks allows for coordinated policy efforts, shared resources, and strengthened advocacy. Effective regional governance bridges the gap between grassroots innovation and national policy influence. It ensures that successful local interventions are not isolated but instead become part of a broader systemic shift. Building horizontal networks between local authorities, food producers, and advocacy groups fosters knowledge exchange and collective action. These collaborations enable actors to tackle shared challenges, such as supply chain disruptions and land access issues, more effectively than if each locality worked in isolation. As Dan Crossley, Executive Director of the Food Ethics Council, said:

“We need to get away from the default that everything has to happen at the national level.”

Regional food strategies can enhance local initiatives by providing additional funding, coordinating infrastructure development, and ensuring that policies align with environmental, health, and resilient food systems goals. For example, regional food hubs have demonstrated how small-scale producers can be connected with larger markets, multi-locality climate adaptation plans have been developed to support local agricultural businesses, and cross-regional partnerships have strengthened actions to address food poverty.





Build capacity both for short-term action and long-term planning

The compounding nature of multiple shocks and crises requires local authorities and local organisations to balance short-term actions with long-term planning to ensure food systems become fair, healthy, sustainable, and resilient.

To achieve this balance, it is critical to build capacity both within and beyond local and regional authorities.

Balance short-term action with long-term planning

Resilient food systems require both immediate responses to crises and long-term structural changes. As Tim Lang, Emeritus Professor of the Centre for Food Policy explains:

“Dealing with shocks is one version of resilience. Resilience actually is about getting societies to be more in control, to be able to feed themselves well.”

This perspective underscores the importance of ensuring that food systems are not just reactive but also proactive in changing practices.

Short-term measures, such as emergency food distribution programs and local supply chain adaptations, are essential in times of crisis. However, these interventions must be complemented by long-term strategies like regenerative agriculture, improved land use planning, and investment in local food infrastructure. Collectively these practices can contribute towards making healthy, sustainable diets available for all. Professor Sir Anthony Finkelstein, President of City St George's, University of London supports this dual approach, stating:

“A more resilient food system is required, not only to weather recent shocks, but to reshape our food systems in ways that are more sustainable, more equitable and more sensitive to their place.”

By integrating short-term responses with long-term policies, local authorities can ensure a steady transition toward more robust food systems.

Build capacity for resilience planning and implementation

Beyond direct interventions, local and regional actors must develop the necessary capacity for resilience planning. Dr Jess Halliday of RUAF, an international organisation devoted to food systems transformation, identified multiple forms of resilience that must be incorporated into food systems governance. The key forms include preventative, absorptive, anticipatory, adaptive, and transformative resilience. Each form plays a crucial role in ensuring food systems are prepared for future challenges. The definitions of each form of resilience are outlined below:

- **Preventative resilience capacity** refers to the ability to take measures to reduce vulnerabilities and to adopt good practices to prevent the worst impacts.
- **Absorptive resilience capacity** refers to the ability to cope during and after being adversely impacted by an event.
- **Anticipatory resilience capacity** refers to the ability to forecast and predict the impacts of possible shocks to our food systems.
- **Adaptive resilience capacity** refers to the ability to function in adverse circumstances by introducing flexibility into day-to-day practices, ensuring that food systems continue to function in the event of a shock or crisis.
- **Transformative resilience capacity** refers to the ability to recognise fundamental challenges in the dominant food system, reimagine how food systems could function, and take steps to enact that vision.

Harness and strengthen horizontal food networks

Horizontal networks of people both in government positions and outside government can play a crucial role in implementing change at the local and regional level. Networks that meaningfully connect policymakers, food producers, retailers, civil society organisations and the public together have great potential to facilitate change. By sharing knowledge, skills and expertise collective action can be triggered. Strengthening these networks is vital for enhancing local capacity to respond to shocks and crises. Strengthening horizontal networks can also enable resources and expertise to be leveraged more effectively and for differences to be aired and worked through. As Anna Taylor described:

“This is all about people making change together. It's not about somebody just making a policy adjustment in a corridor of Whitehall, but about a groundswell of change in local communities as well.”

City Mayors can play a pivotal role in creating and sustaining these networks. As Rosa Foster, Director of the Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission highlighted, the emergence of Metro Mayors presents an opportunity to strengthen food partnerships, promote food education, and build collaboration between supermarkets, farmers, and rural communities. With adequate training and strategic support, Mayors can champion disruptive policies and drive system-wide transformations.

Beyond formal governance structures, horizontal networks also emerge from grassroots collaborations. Anna Chworow from Nourish Scotland emphasised the important role organisations like her own have in fostering informal connections that can gradually grow into influential networks. These relationships, based on mutual trust, can generate the momentum and capacity needed to push for systemic change in food policy and practice.

International knowledge exchange networks also contribute towards building local capacities for short-term and longer-term resilience. When people who are passionate about food come together to share their skills and knowledge across localities, co-created policies and practices are developed to be both place-sensitive and scalable. The C40 Network, for example, has successfully coordinated 97 cities to develop solutions aimed at reducing food-related carbon emissions. Such networks enable cities to learn from one another, accelerating innovation and change.







Challenge systems of oppression that marginalise groups within local food systems

Efforts towards building more resilient food systems must be actively inclusive and challenge existing structures of oppression.

Food systems are shaped by economic, political, and social forces that often reinforce inequalities and limit marginalised communities' access to decision-making power. To create truly resilient food systems, it is essential to use inclusive language, adopt ethical stakeholder engagement practices, and actively dismantle exclusive policy processes.

The role of language in inclusion and exclusion

Language is a powerful tool that can either challenge or reinforce existing power imbalances in food systems. Symposium discussions highlighted how everyday language can either facilitate or hinder participation, particularly for groups that have historically been excluded from food policy discussions. The language of 'inclusion' itself has been problematised in that it can reproduce existing power relations rather than dismantle them. For example, referring to communities as 'hard to reach' can inadvertently reinforce a perception of passivity; that individuals are to blame for not engaging. Truly inclusive practices acknowledge contextual and systemic barriers that prevent people from engaging and actively seek to break the barriers down.



Workshop 3 focused on 'Language and Ways of Working for More Inclusive Food Policy'. Discussions underscored the importance of making policymaking more accessible. Overly technical or bureaucratic language can exclude those without specialised knowledge or those for whom English is not a first language. Delegates suggested replacing abstract terms with practical or visual examples in policy documents to enhance understanding and engagement. Everyone is affected by our food systems and therefore all of us have a right to contribute to food policies and food systems practices. The need to actively challenge inappropriate or marginalising language whenever it arises was also highlighted as essential to fostering a more inclusive dialogue around food systems.

Adopting inclusive practices and ways of working

Beyond language, effective and ethical engagement with a wide range of people, groups and stakeholders is essential for creating resilient food systems. People engaging with food systems come from different backgrounds, hold different values, and work within organisations that vary in their resources and mandates. Without intentional efforts to build trust and long-term relationships, working together risks being superficial and exclusionary.

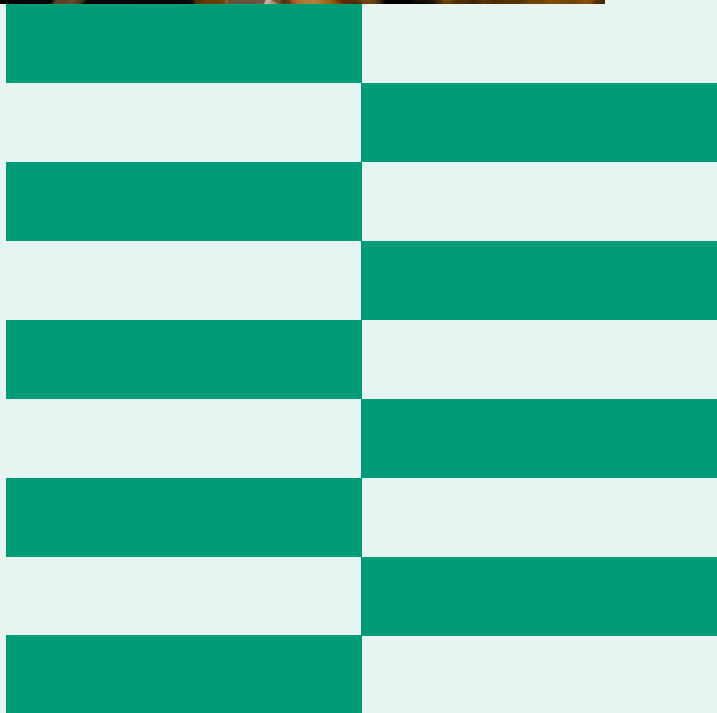
Discussions during the Symposium stressed the need to move from short-term consultations to sustained relationship-building. This approach is particularly important to ensure that historically marginalised voices are not only heard but are given decision-making power in shaping food policies, initiatives and narratives. Anna Chworow of Nourish Scotland emphasised the opportunity for individuals and organisations across food systems sectors to inspire and support each other through authentic collaborations. Building inclusive networks allows for more equitable participation in shaping food policies and practices. Such networks can better reflect diverse perspectives and lived experiences, ultimately offering the greatest chance of achieving the widest benefits.

Conclusion

By strategically leveraging both local innovation and regional collaboration, people across our food systems can drive transformative change to make food systems fairer, healthier, more sustainable, and more resilient in the face of future challenges. The following 10 actions provide practical tips for realising more resilient food systems through local and regional governance.

10 Practical Actions for Enhancing Local and Regional Food Systems

- 1 Develop local food strategies** – Local authorities can create comprehensive food strategies that prioritise sustainability, equity, health, and resilience by enabling local voices to form part of the process and incorporating local procurement policies and food security initiatives.
- 2 Foster regional collaboration** – Local authorities can engage with regional governance structures and other localities to share knowledge and skills, align policies, pool resources, and advocate for supportive national policies.
- 3 Invest in material infrastructure** – Local and regional authorities, businesses and organisations can support infrastructure development for sustainable food systems, such as local processing facilities, distribution hubs, and community-supported agriculture networks.
- 4 Empower local and regional leaders** – Providing training and support for mayors and other officials to champion food systems transformation can benefit the local economy, local environment, and local people.
- 5 Create and resource knowledge-sharing platforms** – Establishing forums allows a wide range of people within localities and regions to exchange expertise and experience to co-develop solutions.
- 6 Support cooperative business models** – Strengthening producer cooperatives, community-supported agriculture (CSA) networks, and regional food hubs can support multiple food systems outcomes.
- 7 Use accessible language** – Replacing technical terminology and abstract concepts with clear, practical examples can open engagement with a wide range of people. Actively challenging exclusionary language when discussing food policy and systems can help change others' practices.
- 8 Engage communities meaningfully** – Building long-term relationships with marginalised communities and ensuring their leadership in decision-making can move beyond tokenistic engagement.
- 9 Facilitate cross-sector collaboration** – Fostering partnerships between government, grassroots organisations, and food systems actors can enable knowledge sharing and co-created solutions.
- 10 Acknowledge and confront structural barriers** – By recognising that food insecurity and exclusion are not individual failures but systemic issues can shift solutions towards policy and structural change.



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