



MISSION CITIES' POLICY BRIEF DECARBONISATION OF AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SYSTEMS

This policy brief presents recommendations for EU decision-makers and European national authorities on decarbonisation of agriculture and food systems formulated by cities participating in the EU Cities Mission (Mission Cities). *These recommendations have resulted from discussions among 23 Mission Cities during the Policy Lab on Agriculture and Food Systems Decarbonisation facilitated by NetZeroCities.*

NetZeroCities is a consortium consisting of 33 partners from 27 European countries, managing the EU Cities Mission platform. The project supports the [112 European cities](#) known as the [Mission Cities](#) in drastically reducing their greenhouse gas emissions to achieve climate neutrality. The EU Cities Mission supports the [European Green Deal](#) in building a low-carbon, climate-resilient future through research and innovation.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cities are at the forefront of driving change towards sustainable food systems and are focusing on a number of key areas to drive this necessary transition. However, the overall EU policy landscape does not fully support the implementation of such changes. While food systems account for a significant share of total emissions in the EU, there is still no coherent political strategy to enable such transition.

This policy brief analyses the main effects and consequences of our current food systems, offers an overview of how the EU can contribute to shifting this situation, and highlights the importance of local communities in making this change happen and ultimately ease the path towards climate neutrality.



INTRODUCTION

NetZeroCities Policy Labs aim to empower representatives from Mission Cities to voice their climate-related policy needs to EU decision-makers. These labs provide participants with insights into the latest EU climate policy developments affecting Mission Cities' paths to climate neutrality, while also addressing real-world challenges faced by cities. Through collaborative discussions, participants produce policy recommendations to advocate for cities' needs at the EU level.

NetZeroCities helps Mission Cities identify policy gaps that need to be tackled at the EU level, creating online or in-person spaces for knowledge exchange between peer cities. These Policy Labs enable municipalities to learn from one another, tackle shared policy challenges, develop recommendations, and ensure that the needs of cities are effectively communicated to EU representatives. The final outputs of each lab, in the form of a Policy Brief, are shared with the European Commission to ensure European cities' voices are heard.

Since December 2023, NetZeroCities has successfully organised eight Policy Labs, covering topics such as Circular Economy, Nature-Based Solutions, Energy Communities, Built Environment, Sustainable Mobility, and Industrial Decarbonisation. This policy brief covers the highlights of the eighth and last lab on Decarbonisation of food systems and agriculture.

With the renewed appointment of a new European Commission led by Ursula Von der Leyen, new objectives have been set. Prosperity and competitiveness are at the heart of the Commission's agenda, but the challenge lies in balancing economic competitiveness with climate neutrality. As outlined by the new Commission, the target to reduce EU emissions by 90% by 2040 remains a priority.

Amid the most relevant sectors to tackle emissions, food systems are both a culprit and a victim of the climate crisis. They are responsible for one-third of global emissions¹ and the root of numerous issues related to health, social inequality, biodiversity and nature. Moreover, the current reliance on synthetic pesticides, fertilisers, and fossil fuels in food production contributes highly to climate change. Shifting towards more sustainable practices and taking an agroecological approach offers an opportunity to simultaneously improve health, address social inequalities, and mitigate climate change. The International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) reports that by acting on food systems in a holistic way, an 18% GHG emission reduction could be achieved by shifting to well managed production practices, 8% by transitioning to sustainable diets and halving meat production and consumption and a further 8% by halving food loss and waste. By improving the agri-food sector, the EU can achieve multiple co-benefits by reducing greenhouse gas emissions while fostering a more equitable society and driving down health costs.

In the past decade, food systems have made their way among mayors' priorities, evidenced by the 280+ cities that have signed the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact worldwide since 2015, with over 100 in Europe. This is also evidenced with European projects like [Food Trails](#) and [FoodCLIC](#). In Food Trails, 11 European cities launched living labs to develop sustainable urban food strategies with more than 179 local stakeholders²; in FoodCLIC, 13 European cities are working to establish Food Policy Councils to address city-region food system challenges by connecting policy makers and stakeholders and linking urban-rural areas. Whilst ensuring sustainable and healthy food systems is not always a formal part of cities' competences, the 2024 Eurocities Pulse Survey³ shows that climate action and social equity are their top concerns, and it is crucial to recognise the role that food systems play in both.

¹<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1086822>

²<https://foodtrails.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org/resources-page/>

³<https://monitor.eurocities.eu/eurocities-pulse-mayors-survey/>



The new term for the European Commission presents an opportunity to advance a more innovative, sustainable, healthy and equitable food system that enhances the EU's resilience and independence. The EU's Vision for the Future of Agriculture and Food expected to be published in February 2025, along with the upcoming revision of the Public Procurement Directive, will be key in proposing a way forward that recognises the role of cities, and offers a strategic guidance and funding to support cities in shaping the future of European and urban food systems. This Policy Brief analyses the recent EU food policy developments and highlights the voices of local authorities already aiming to transition to healthier, more sustainable, food systems that contribute to both societal well-being and climate neutrality.



EU POLICY FRAMEWORK ON AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SYSTEM DECARBONISATION

In 2023, nearly 10% of the European Union's population was unable to afford proper meals, a concerning rise from 8.3% in 2020⁴. This trend not only highlights the deepening issue of food insecurity but also underscores the broader challenges facing EU food systems. Urban areas, where over 70% of Europeans now reside, are at the heart of this issue, grappling with rising diet-related diseases, including cancers, cardiovascular illnesses, and diabetes. These health concerns are exacerbated by the dominance of processed foods and unsustainable diets that rely heavily on fats, sugars, salt and animal products. Furthermore, the systemic exploitation of farm labour—particularly among migrant workers—remains an issue that demands urgent attention.

For years, EU food policy has lacked coherence and cross-sectoral connections. The Common

Agricultural Policy (CAP) and fragmented regulations have failed to offer a unified approach for the transition of food systems towards a more sustainable way of existing. While the EU Farm to Fork strategy introduced in 2020 as part of the European Green Deal represented an opportunity and a significant step towards an integrated food policy, the geopolitical crises such as the war in Ukraine, the subsequent rise in living costs and the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted its momentum and placed it on hold. Some of the files that were disrupted intended to reduce pesticide use and improve animal welfare.

Nevertheless, there are glimmers of hope as in recent years, civil society has succeeded in reshaping the narrative around food systems. The role played by food environments in shaping consumer demand has become more strongly recognised. This is evidenced in the report by the [Strategic Dialogue for Agriculture](#), adopted unanimously by a wide range of stakeholders from civil society, farmers groups and industry, which call for action to be taken for food systems to “flourish within the limits of planetary boundaries”. Their conclusions include the necessity for the EU to support a shift to sustainable diets, to improve food environments and leverage the power of public food procurement, among others. Although cities' perspectives were not included in the Dialogue, the European Board on Agri-Food created as one of its outcomes offers the possibility for local authorities to become members, which will be critical to leverage the experience and innovation at the local level.

The new EU Commission also opens new opportunities for the promotion of sustainable food systems. While living in a context of economic, technological, and social uncertainties, the new college of commissioners understands food and agriculture play an important part in building resilience and sustainability in the EU and emphasises the cruciality of local communities to achieve it. The revision of EU rules on public procurement presents an opportunity to push for sustainability, animal welfare, and social values in food purchasing. In parallel, as public

⁴[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20240712-1#:~:text=In%202023%2C%209.5%25%20of%20the,compared%20with%202022%20\(8.3%25\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20240712-1#:~:text=In%202023%2C%209.5%25%20of%20the,compared%20with%202022%20(8.3%25))

procurement is viewed as an important tool to ensure the sustainability of food systems, the Joint Research Centre (JRC) is currently preparing a set of possible minimum criteria for sustainable public procurement for food that could help guide cities in the development of tenders. Moreover, the newly launched FutureFoodS partnership and the ongoing EU Urban Agenda Food partnership fosters collaboration between cities, national governments, and EU institutions, highlighting the importance of local needs and food strategies.

The new European Commission will publish during the first 100 days of the 2024-2029 mandate the “EU Vision on Agriculture and Food” expected end of February 2025, which should build on the recommendations from the Strategic Dialogue on the Future of Agriculture, and is expected to provide targeted support for farmers, incentives for a sustainable transition and investments to promote innovation.

While progress is being made at a local level, and cities are giving increasing importance to food that enhances the wellbeing of the planet and their citizens, local authorities still face significant challenges. Notably, municipalities lack the resources and dedicated departments to address food-related issues comprehensively, and in many instances, establishing a political framework for agriculture is not a competence of local governments.

This policy brief aims to provide an overview of the current state of EU food policy, identify gaps and challenges, and propose concrete actions that can help cities build more sustainable, resilient food systems that benefit people, plants and animals. By advocating for greater coherence between EU, national, and local policies, and ensuring that cities have a seat at the table in EU decision-making, we can create a future where urban food systems contribute to healthier, more equitable, and environmentally sustainable communities across Europe.

PRESENTING THE CHALLENGE OWNERS

MILAN

Challenge: *How can public procurement continue to decrease GHG emissions? How can cities integrate sustainability criteria to make this reduction a reality?*

Since 2015, the Italian city of Milan has been at the forefront of developing a sustainable and inclusive food policy, with a particular focus on the role of public procurement in driving change. Central to this policy is the city’s food canteen service, managed by the public agency Milano Ristorazione, which operates under an in-house providing model fully controlled by the municipality. Milano Ristorazione serves an impressive 15 million meals annually, across 420 canteens and 182 kindergartens, supported by 23 cooking centres and a single logistics hub. This extensive infrastructure makes it a powerful tool for achieving Milan's food policy goals, ensuring access to healthy, sustainable food for a large portion of the city’s population.

The public procurement system has been key to transforming Milan’s food landscape, aligning local priorities with actionable policies. Through this system, Milano Ristorazione has become a significant driver of investments in local food systems. By setting clear sustainability criteria in public tenders, the city has influenced the market, encouraging local producers to adopt sustainable practices. This strategy has had a measurable impact, with a 34% reduction in emissions from public procurement by 2022 compared to data from 2015, highlighting the potential of food procurement as a lever for change in both environmental and social outcomes.

However, the question arises when Milan considers maintaining the use of public procurement as a supporting tool in the future. The city aims at continuing to use public procurement in food tenders to keep on decreasing GHG emissions. The legislative framework at national level have been supportive in that sense, with the Minimum



Environmental Criteria in Italy (Decree 10/2020): legal framework at national level enabling local authorities on how to integrate the sustainability criteria.

However, a comprehensive EU legal framework on sustainable public procurement and sustainability criteria is key to leverage long-term public procurement integration as part of cities strive for a locally sourced and sustainable food system.

NANTES METROPOLE

Challenge: *How can Nantes Metropole support local agriculture towards a climate compatible farm-to-fork policy?*

In France, Nantes Metropole, an urban area surrounded by a strong agricultural region, has made significant advances in developing a more sustainable and resilient food system. The region is home to a thriving agricultural sector, with 25% of its land dedicated to organic farming, and the city aims to increase this share by 50% by 2030 to provide healthier food to its population. Despite this progress, Nantes Metropole faces several pressing challenges, including demographic shifts, land pressure, and the impacts of climate change, with one-third of farmers nearing retirement and two-thirds already affected by changing climate conditions.

In response to these challenges, the metropole has adopted a dedicated public policy for agriculture and food, first in 2019 and later in 2023, with clear priorities focused on enhancing agricultural resilience and strengthening land protection to preserve sustainable food production capacities. One of the core objectives is to encourage the adoption of organic and more sustainable farming practices, with the city investing €1.6 million in 2024 to support farmers with new equipment, land acquisition, and infrastructure.

However, the region faces limitations in receiving sufficient support from the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for young farmers and organic transitions as the age limit to access for such EU support is under forty.

To address this, Nantes metropole has pioneered the creation of a payment for environmental services system to support agroecological practices and facilitate the inclusion of new farmers. Although the city does not have a dedicated food or agricultural department, the issue is integrated within the Directorate of Ecological Transition, ensuring a holistic approach to sustainable food system development.

AARHUS

Challenge: *How can we as cities address the interconnected challenges related to agri-food system transformation in a coherent and engaging way for both the business community and citizens?*

Similarly to Nantes-Metropole, the Danish Mission City of Aarhus, is also surrounded by rural areas. Therefore, the city has been making significant strides towards integrating sustainable food systems into its climate strategy. The city successfully convinced the local council that adopting a plant-based diet is essential for becoming climate neutral, positioning food systems as a key component of its climate action plan. This strategic focus has led to the inclusion of a food system work package in Aarhus' new climate plan, recognising the interconnectedness of food production, consumption, and environmental impact.

Aarhus aims to leverage partnerships with key business stakeholders to foster innovation and build relationships that drive systemic change. By engaging influential actors across the food system, the city is working to create a common direction for a more sustainable food future. This approach is not just about environmental goals, but also about creating a business development and innovation agenda, encouraging the



private sector to embrace sustainable practices and contribute to the city's climate neutrality objectives.

To enhance healthier diets among citizens and farmers, Aarhus is focusing on strengthening food procurement strategies starting with the local government. This includes sourcing more sustainable food and promoting plant-based options within municipal services. Additionally, the city is exploring scalable solutions for sustainable land use management, ensuring that food systems contribute to both climate goals and the overall well-being of the community.

The Danish Mission City would like to receive further guidance on how to better involve stakeholders (who aren't already engaged) at the local level, in the upcoming "EU Vision on Agriculture and Food", by the European Commission.

competencies, which complicates efforts to transform the local food system. To address these challenges, Bordeaux Métropole must rely on collaboration with other local actors and secure political and technical commitment to support the implementation of food policies. One of the key hurdles the city faces is the difficulty in obtaining adequate resources, as the current funding structure does not fully support local food system initiatives.

To overcome these barriers, Bordeaux Métropole advocates for changes to EU funding policies, urging the direct allocation of funds to local authorities to enable cities and metropolises to address the right to food effectively.

A successful bid for a European call allowed Bordeaux Métropole to expand its food team from one officer to three, reflecting the growing priority placed on food system transformation.

BORDEAUX MÉTROPOLE

Challenge: *How can European metropolitan cities have competencies to adopt a systemic food policy?*

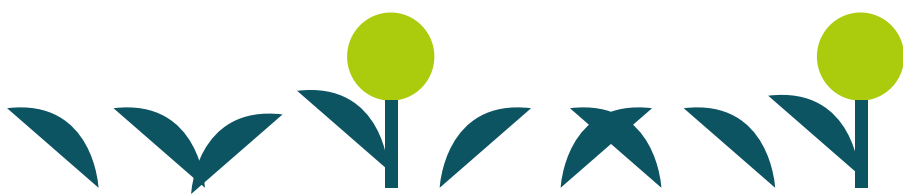
Bordeaux Métropole has made significant strides towards creating a more sustainable and equitable food system, culminating in the adoption of a systemic food policy in November 2022. After 1.5 years of extensive collaboration with stakeholders, the Métropole developed 45 actions aligned with the EU's Farm to Fork strategy, aimed at transforming the local food landscape. However, the implementation of this policy presents several challenges, particularly as Bordeaux Métropole lacks direct competencies over food systems. The responsibility for food-related issues falls to other local authorities, making it difficult for the Métropole to claim legitimacy in this area and to ensure effective coordination across governance levels.

This gap in authority has meant that Bordeaux Métropole is often overstepping its formal

OVERALL OBSERVATION

Cities are at the forefront of driving change towards sustainable food systems and are focusing on a number of key areas. The primary areas of focus include support for organic and agroecological food production, sustainable food public procurement, collaboration and engagement with local stakeholders, and integrating food systems into climate action plans.

However, as explained by challenge owners, local authorities face substantial challenges in their efforts. One of the main obstacles is the lack of direct competencies in food policy, as seen in Bordeaux Métropole, which complicates the implementation of systemic food policies and requires significant coordination with other local authorities. Governance structures and the lack of local governments competences often hinder the coordination necessary for achieving comprehensive food system transformation. Resource constraints also present a strong barrier, with many cities struggling to secure adequate



long-term funding and staff to drive food-related initiatives, and instead overly rely on funded projects. Additionally, the transition to organic and agroecological farming is hindered by limited EU support, particularly for young farmers and those transitioning to sustainable practices, as EU CAP subsidies continue to disproportionately support industrial food production.

Cities require an EU Vision for a transition to sustainable food systems that leverages the experience of cities, supports them in scaling up successful innovative initiatives, and addresses the challenges faced by cities. including the lack of funding for local authorities. Cities also need greater flexibility in public procurement, allowing them to tailor tenders to incentivise sustainable food practices, support shorter supply chains and promote sustainable plant-based diets.

Greater policy coherence and multi-level governance is needed at the EU level, for example in the upcoming revisions of the Common Agricultural Policy and the Public Procurement Directive, to enable cities to effectively drive the transition to healthy and climate-neutral food systems.

In summary, while cities are taking significant strides to build sustainable food systems and healthy food environments, they need stronger governance structures (such as food policy councils), increased financial and technical support, and a more coordinated approach across different levels of government and the EU to realise their ambitious goals.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure food systems contribute to climate neutrality, the EU should:

TAKE A FOOD SYSTEMS APPROACH

- The European Union must uphold a holistic food systems approach to policy-making, relying on a multi-DG governance structure, and bring forth the long-awaited proposal for an EU Food Policy.

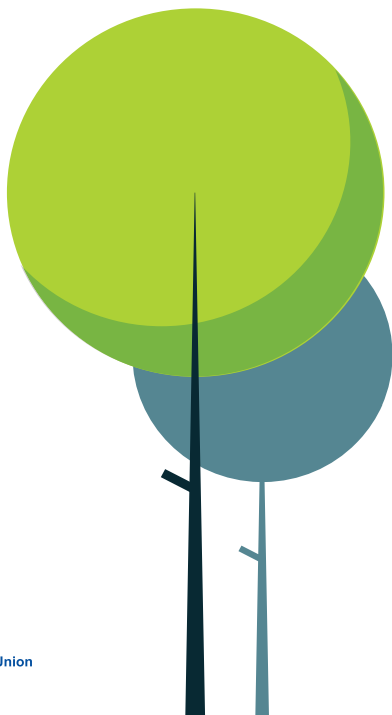
- To tackle interconnected challenges of the climate, public health, social and biodiversity crises, action must be taken to support both the production and consumption of healthy and sustainable food.

- The European Commission must encourage multilevel governance dialogues between national, regional, and local governments to ensure EU food and agricultural policy is informed by the realities and priorities of urban areas and city-regions. Cities should be represented in the [European Board for Agriculture and Food](#), and the [FutureFoodS Partnership](#) to advise on the needs and challenges faced by local stakeholders and provide recommendations and examples of successful implementation of food system initiatives.

LEVERAGE PUBLIC PROCUREMENT TO INCREASE AVAILABILITY OF HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD

- The European Union should establish public procurement policies within the agriculture and food sectors that prioritise the creation of sustainable and resilient food supply chains.

- To enhance the leverage of cities, particularly in the face of large players in the industrial food and agriculture sector, the EU should allow for the fragmentation of tenders, enabling cities to engage smaller, local suppliers. This would promote greater participation from sustainable and organic and agroecological farming initiatives, supporting a more diverse and resilient local food economy.



INCREASE FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ORGANIC AND AGROECOLOGICAL FARMING AND GARDENING

- The EU should establish dedicated funding mechanisms to support cities in promoting organic and agroecological farming and gardening both within urban areas and in surrounding rural regions.
- Cities must be granted dedicated resources to fund the development of young farmers committed to organic and agroecological farming practices. Targeted financial support should be provided for cities to foster the emergence and growth of small-scale farming initiatives that align with sustainability goals.

SUPPORT FOOD POLICY COUNCILS, CAPACITY BUILDING AND TRAINING FOR CITIES AND FOOD SYSTEM WORKERS

- Due to the generational gap that exists in the farming sector and the imminent retirement of a significant portion of the farming workforce, the EU should create healthy and attractive economic conditions to encourage the next generation of farmers and farm workers for the benefit of people and nature. This should be enforced by investing in training programs designed to equip young farmers with the skills and knowledge necessary to adopt agroecological and organic farming practices and enter the market.
- Special emphasis should be placed on capacity building for cities to effectively engage with local producers, enabling them to create tailored food policies and frameworks that support sustainable farming transitions.
- Provide sustainable food systems training and upskilling should be provided to city employees involved in food system work – healthcare, procurement, land and garden management, planning and zoning.

FOSTERING STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND PRIVATE SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

- The EU should facilitate greater collaboration between cities and the private sector, particularly

with agri-businesses and farming organisations. Cities often lack the political power or direct influence to drive the shift towards organic and agroecological farming, making it crucial to engage with key stakeholders in the food supply chain.

- Encourage and support multi-stakeholder Food Policy Councils (FPCs) at local and national levels that include diverse stakeholders such as local and regional governments, food growers, NGOs, chefs, local businesses, trade associations, universities, and civil society. These councils can influence food policy, foster vertical and horizontal policy integration as well as the collaboration among various actors, link inhabitants with government and address food poverty.

LEVERAGING PARTNERSHIPS FOR URBAN-RURAL COLLABORATION

- National and regional governments should be encouraged to foster partnerships between large farming corporations and small-scale, organic farmers. The EU should create synergies that support the growth of sustainable, local food systems by bridging the gap between urban and rural farming systems.
- Integrate the topic of food systems into economic development policies and schemes and encourage food markets, procurement, and participation by SMEs as an economic development tool.



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