



**Explorative Proposal
for an UAEU Thematic Partnership under the Ljubljana Agreement**

Food

Challenge:

Food production, distribution and consumption are not only important sectors of the economy, representing 7% of EU GDP, but also linked to complex social and ecological challenges.

An increasing number of EU citizens is unable to purchase quality food. Especially low-income families increasingly rely on food banks or cheap, low-quality foods to cover their daily calory intake. At the same time, awareness of well-balanced, healthy diets is not mainstreamed. This contributes to rising obesity rates, high blood pressure and diabetes, which are all directly related to unhealthy food consumption patterns that affect particularly the most vulnerable in society. The negative spillovers for the public health sector and well-being and productivity of citizens are multitude.

Unhealthy consumption patterns are often based on unsustainable food production methods that are particularly harmful for the planet. The food industry is responsible for around 17% of greenhouse gas emissions and, according to evidence from the JRC, this can be reduced by 28% by 2030 when coupling the Common Agricultural policy with the principles of the Farm to Fork strategy. Producers might be tempted to export these unsustainable practices and related emissions. Therefore, making local food production and distribution a viable solution is essential to reach the EU climate goals.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the unreliability of global food supply chains. Within the context of current and future pandemics and the unfolding climate crisis food resilience is a huge global challenge, which should best be tackled locally, with an eye on supporting communities involved in international food production. Stakeholders from producers to consumers are increasingly aware of the interrelations between food security, health, ecosystems, supply chains, consumption patterns and planetary boundaries. Urban-rural multilevel and multi-actor cooperation is essential to overcome the siloed approach and account for the complexity of our food systems. Current EU regulation is not always acting as an enabler of food sector transformation, and for instance innovative local food procurement remains difficult under current EU rules.

Opportunity:

75% of Europeans live in urban areas, making cities the centres of food distribution and consumption. Local authorities are therefore key actors in the food supply chain. Evidence and recognition of their potential for shaping sustainable, fair and healthy food systems is growing over time. Examples are multiple: city authorities support food banks and provide quality food to those in need as part of the social and solidarity economy. Cities are the closest level of governments can support citizens and their innovative potential and involve them through CSOs and food council creation. They are drivers of innovative urban and peri-urban agricultural practices and support daily the coordination of local food markets. With their purchasing power, they drive demand of local food in schools, hospitals, etc.

Food is an opportunity for cities to build a stronger circular economy locally by creating urban-rural linkages between food producers, retailers and consumers. Shorter supply lines reduce GHG emissions, helping all stakeholders achieve their climate targets.

Reconnecting consumers with producers increases awareness of seasonality of produce and thereby supports the diversity of regional food systems, including alternative production systems. Knowledge of the local market helps avoid overproduction and food waste, while urban organic waste can be re-used in rural areas as fertilisers and energy source.

Localizing supply chain represents a tremendous opportunity to help the environment. When reducing shipping and storage, emissions and energy usage are also reduced. Sourcing locally not only contributes to local production and healthy food systems, but ultimately helps increasing consciousness about consumer behaviour. New categories of products with eco labels are moving online and there is an increasing awareness on part of customers who elevate the need for change, especially regarding sustainable deliveries.

A further challenge is the more strategic use of procurement from local authorities to address many of the food system challenges. Public procurement is an important tool to increase the demand for more sustainable products, such as organic and local food, and to shift consumers' behaviour towards healthier and more sustainable diets, combatting obesity and malnutrition. However, it still provides some challenges for local authorities for which an adjustment in legislation and additional training should be supported.

This multilevel and multi-stakeholder approach will create innovative governance across sectors with citizens at the centre. Public procurement and urban planning become strategic tools to achieve food resilience and to guarantee the access to high quality food. Examples for how cities can use those tools include the provision of areas for local markets, the creation of social hubs for the redistribution of recovered food (food aid) and the inclusion of alternative production methods (urban agriculture) in land planning and zoning.

Mission of the proposed Thematic Partnership:

The mission of this Thematic Partnership is to gather relevant stakeholders at all levels to exchange ideas, promote regulations and investments that can improve local food supply chains for urban areas to increase proximity¹ and quality food production and consumption. This includes the strengthening of human and economic exchanges between the urban centres and their rural peripheries and a circular approach to food production and waste, while considering also affordable food for healthy diet, innovative solutions, urban agriculture and preservation of soil and biodiversity.

Contributing to Green, Productive and Just cities and building on digitalisation and good urban governance:

Cities action on food will have effects all along the food supply chain and throughout food systems. This means that the effects of urban food policy will not only be felt locally but spill over to the surrounding rural areas where local food is produced.

¹ Proximity-enhancing strategies focus on people's local access to a wide range of services and amenities important for quality of life—such as quality food, healthcare facilities, preschools and schools, social services, commercial services, leisure, cultural, and entertainment amenities, and parks and nature.

Creating environmentally and socially sustainable food systems can only be achieved by innovative practices. The necessity of innovation will provide opportunities for local entrepreneurs to uncover and address needs, thereby creating a favourable environment for food-related start-ups. This will strengthen a place-based economy that is closely linked to local sustainable food production and distribution networks, creating a more productive economic environment. Digitalisation can offer new solutions for connecting producers directly with consumers, and also be used to better map food flows and reduce food waste.

Localising food production and distribution will reduce significantly transport-related GHG emissions. Furthermore, the shift towards seasonal produce can reduce the energy consumption needed for greenhouses and similar installations. Reduction of intensive farming practices as well as the introduction of farming in urban and peri-urban areas can increase biodiversity and promote a direct connection of the consumer with the products.

The social impact of urban food policy is significant. Supporting all citizens in accessing healthy and quality food helps close the food gap between high and low income individuals. Rural and peri-urban areas can profit from an increased awareness of their role to the local economy and ecology through high quality and seasonal products. This will create social and economic linkages which will help bridge the urban-rural divide and lead, in fine, to a more sustainable, healthy and equitable society.

Addressing the challenges through an Urban Agenda Partnership:

Better regulation is needed as current rules mainly govern food safety during production and distribution. This might change in the future under the sustainable food system law, expected for 2023, which will include targets on food waste and use of minimum mandatory food procurement criteria. This Thematic Partnership could contribute to the better recognition of urban oriented agriculture, peri-urban agriculture and urban food production during legislative processes.

To be able to achieve this, better knowledge is needed on the potential and levers of urban food strategies. The number of comprehensive urban food strategies is not very high at the moment. A collection and dissemination of good practices at EU level is therefore necessary, particularly to adapt overarching strategies to local circumstances and evaluate the impact of the policies through a KPI framework.

New funding opportunities for urban food strategies need to be explored and developed. One important step is the evaluation of Farm to Fork funding and how it could be used to leverage funding for local food projects. Building on the better knowledge pillar, dedicated funding opportunities can be proposed at EU and national level as part of better regulation for urban food strategies.

Aligning with and supporting EU priorities:

- FOOD 2030 pathways for action have already identified urban food as one of the areas in need of additional EU funding for research and innovation.
- The proposed Horizon Europe Food Systems Partnership could be used as a tool to co-fund and network urban food policy labs.
- Common agricultural policy and common fisheries policy.
- EU procurement directive.
- The work taking place under the Farm to fork communication identifies the need to work more systemically on food matters, particularly in terms of multilevel governance.

- EU Rural Vision and Action plan has lined out a vision for prosperous and connected rural areas, which can be connected to urban-rural partnerships on food policy.
- Strategic use of EU funding.
- Relevant actors at EU level are DG SANTE, DG AGRI, DG REGIO, DG RTD, the European Parliament where Agri and Envi are currently developing initiatives for the Farm to Fork strategy, AGRI council.
- DG GROW's Intelligent Cities Challenge – working group on supply chains is working on fostering local value loops, shorter, more sustainable supply chains, reducing transport and better links with surrounding rural areas.
- Cooperation with existing European programmes and networks working on urban food (URBACT, International Urban Food Network, Milan Urban Food Policy Pact).

Building on previous Thematic Partnerships:

This Thematic Partnership would build on the work of previous partnerships, including: the **Circular economy** Partnership with a focus on their work on investment in bio-based solutions; the **Innovative and responsible public procurement** Partnership, as procurement is the main tool city use when working on food systems at local level; the **Urban poverty and Integration of migrants & refugees** Partnership, which highlighted the need for access to quality food for all; the **Urban mobility** Partnership as improving food logistic means improving access to quality food; and the **Sustainable use of land and Nature-based solutions** Partnership, which has explored new solutions for urban food production.