

Urban food systems may be just a 'side dish' at Habitat III

Written by Grace Muriuki, Program Manager, Food Systems Program, Global Change Institute, The University of Queensland

The year 2016 is crucial for both food and cities. In October, UN member states will convene for the [Habitat III conference in Quito](#), Ecuador, to discuss [guidelines for sustainable urban development](#) for the next 20 years.

In relation to food, 2016 has seen increased interest in bringing food to centre stage of many non-traditional domains. For example: this is the [International Year of the Pulses](#); food waste is getting more attention, such as the announcement of the first global standard to [measure food loss and waste](#); and food and agriculture lie at the very heart of the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs).

At the 2016 Global Forum for Food and Agriculture ([GFFA](#)), UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon [said](#) :

Ensuring that everyone in expanding urban areas has access to nutritious food is critical to achieving the goal of zero hunger set out in the 2030 [SDG] Agenda.

[Sustainable diets](#) are gaining traction, and many governments are demonstrating [high-level commitment](#)

Will the new urban agenda put food on the table?

On the road to Quito, the zero draft of the [New Urban Agenda](#) bears only oblique references to food systems.

Food (security) has been “sprinkled” over physical and social infrastructure, natural resources and ecosystems, sustainable consumption, resilience, urban planning, land and mobility. It is conspicuously missing from urban basic services and altogether from heritage and culture.

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This omission has occurred despite common knowledge of food's profound impacts. It shapes rural landscapes, provides spaces for buying, selling and eating food in cities, and is integral to everyday individual and collective identities.

If the New Urban Agenda carries a promise for change, sustainable and equitable food systems in cities will perhaps only be a side dish at Quito.

Cities' role in food systems is growing

The [Milan Urban Food Policy Pact](#) is testament to the increasing realisation of the need for urban planners to make food systems central in city planning. More than half of humanity lives in urban areas.

According to the UN, nearly [70% of the global population](#) will live in cities by 2050, making urbanisation one of the 21st century's most transformative trends.

Of the 124 signatories to the Milan Pact, Melbourne is the only Australian signatory. Although the pact's framework for action is voluntary, it provides strategic options to those cities aiming to achieve more sustainable food systems.

Melbourne is also part of the [100 Resilient Cities](#) project, which sees food shortages as a potential threat to urban resilience.

Increasing recognition of the multiple dimensions of food in cities is driving the urban food debate. It encompasses nutrition, ethics and social justice, and sustainability.

In Canada, the US, South America, the UK and a few cases in Australia (notably Melbourne), municipal governments are increasingly seeking ways to promote synergistic relationships between food consumers and producers. But this process remains sporadic and non-systemic.

Australian cities are complacent about food

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Australians are predominantly [urban dwellers](#) . More than 80% of the population lives in the 20 largest cities.

As well as the horde of other issues for urban food systems, Australia has one of the most concentrated food retail sectors in the world dominated by the [supermarket duopoly](#) , significant [health disparities](#) between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and a serious and growing issue of [food waste](#) .

All of the SDGs have targets that are directly or indirectly related to the daily work of regional and local governments, the closest administrative units to communities. In 2015, there were 571 local governing bodies across Australia. This is the level of government best placed to link the global goals with local communities.

It is at the municipal level that the socioeconomic and environmental problems associated with food systems first become evident. In Queensland, for example, the 2011 floods [showed the potential impact of disaster](#) on urban food systems.

Despite a renewed [national focus on cities](#) in Australia, food systems remain a secondary consideration. Neither the Australian Local Government Association ([ALGA](#)) nor the Planning Institute of Australia ([PIA](#)) has food for the cities in their strategic plans. Researchers such as [Paul Burton](#) and [Meg Montague](#) allude to the “complacent attitude” to urban food systems in Australia.

The City of Melbourne is notable in promoting integrated local government planning on key factors that influence food systems – transport, housing, economic development and land use. Several local governments have trialled micro-level initiatives to improve health and reduce inequities, or reduce ecological footprints. Most cities are lagging, though, when it comes to

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food systems.

Battle will be won or lost in cities

Food systems are perhaps not as visible as other areas of urban development. They are, however, an essential element that involves many aspects of cities. These include:

- transport and infrastructure (connecting consumers, retailers and producers);
- housing (access to affordable nutritious food);
- recreation;
- economy (food sector businesses and employment); and
- culture and identity.

Food is a new policy arena for city governments, but cannot be separated from housing, water and sanitation, energy, employment and all the other rights related to a life of dignity that local governments promote. Urban food systems are poorly understood, though. Often there is no clear jurisdiction or mandate by which city planners can manage these systems.

The challenge is to broaden the scope of policy debates beyond food supply chains and urban

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agriculture, to include strategic plans and reforms to tackle food systems.

This could help to identify strategic leverage points that can affect the way food business is done in cities and have significant impacts on diet-related diseases, large urban carbon footprints, food waste, social injustice and the negative impacts of supermarket power.

Indeed, the battle for sustainable development [will be won or lost in cities](#) .

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