# 6. Social Circularity: Food-sharing Platforms Are Re-inventing Urban Solidarity

by Thomas de Groot

Foodtopia started three years ago in Murcia, a university town in the southeast of Spain. Initially just a pop-up kitchen on the university campus, it was run by a collective of four passionate people from various backgrounds, from engineering to retail. “We were, and still are, worried about the future that we leave to our grandchildren”, says Jesús, one of the founders. “That is why we wanted to start a revolution in the perverse food industry”.

And revolution is still needed, they claim. “The planet is warming at an alarming rate and as a global community we are simply not doing enough. People are already dying from climate collapse all over the world. The chaos will increase. Meanwhile, ignoring warnings from everywhere, we keep talking about economic growth. Our political representatives have abandoned us, or so it seems.”

The idea behind Foodtopia1 was to ask people to bring their leftover food to this campus kitchen, in order to turn it into communal meals for all. The response was overwhelming right from the start. Within a few weeks, the Foodtopia crew were feeding hundreds of people per day. Now, they have food hubs in many other towns and villages, that run complete circular systems, from local agriculture to production to communal meals.

“We are learning a lot from the urban farming revolution that happened in Cuba in the 1990s”, Jesús explains. After the Soviet Union collapsed, Cuba lost their main trading partner. That, combined with stifling economic sanctions from the US, they had no choice but to radically change their agriculture and economy in order to stop the ensuing famine. Cubans turned to urban farming on a massive scale, pioneering techniques that people still use today, all over the world.

Food is more than just a means of sustenance, the people behind the Foodtopia project claim. It is the basis for community building, for civic life. Gathering food, or growing it, cooking together and organizing meals, it is all part of creating healthy and inclusive communities. And community members can only do their part to stop climate change if they work together. Jesús explains that Foodtopia strives for resilience in local food systems and that they all have a strong sense of urgency. “We have all seen the studies: our planet will collapse if we continue on this path of carbon dependence. Degrowth is the only real solution.”

The Spaniards are not alone in their conviction. In cities all over the world, organizations are creating new social practices by building communities around food. Some work exclusively with food waste, others don’t. Some never charge any money for the meals and others expect one or two euros in return. But all share the belief that food stands for something much more: it is a symbol for civic sovereignty and social revival. “People need to feel sovereign in their neighbourhood”, says Jesús. “Food turns out to be the perfect starting point for strengthening the community by sharing resources.”

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BuurtBuik is a Dutch non-profit that fights against foodwaste by collecting surplus food from supermarkets, catering companies and restaurants in order to cook free meals with that food for everyone in the neighbourhood. It is also a movement to promote inclusive sustainability or, as they call it, ‘social circularity’. BuurtBuik works2 with companies like HelloFresh, social organisations like the Salvation Army and institutions like the municipality of Amsterdam to raise awareness about foodwaste, social exclusion, poverty, loneliness and health.

The Netherlands is one of the richest countries on earth, yet many Dutch people have lived mostly the adverse effects of thirty years of exceedingly neoliberal and austere policies. Decades of center-left and center-right governments have led to a paradoxal situation. Dutch GDP grows 1 or 2 percent each year3, yet around 200,000 Dutch children and 8 percent of households live below the poverty line4. In cities like Amsterdam, 1 in 6 people live below the poverty line, 27,000 of which are children5. 7 per cent of the population (more than one million people) feel severely lonely6. In Amsterdam, that group accounts for one-sixth of the population7. Lonely people have a statistically higher chance of being poor and vice versa8. Both poverty and loneliness are very bad for your health. In fact, lonely people that live in poverty have a health-life expectancy (the number of ‘healthy years’) that is 15 years lower than the average young urban professional that might live in the same street as them9.

All over The Netherlands, teams of volunteers organize BuurtBuik-meals in community centers. The meals are cooked using only surplus food from supermarkets and restaurants in the neighbourhood. All meals are always free and accessible for everyone. This is the formula that has made BuurtBuik grow out to become one of the most vital and inspiring initiatives in the country. The volunteers at BuurtBuik have set out to battle food waste, which is a huge problem. In Amsterdam, for instance, businesses and consumers together throw away more than 100,000 kilograms of good food each year10. If food waste were a country, it would be in the top three biggest polluters in the world, right behind China and the United States11. The emissions that are released to sustain our global food production accounts for one tenth of all human-made greenhouse gas emissions12.

Just working on one of these challenges, whether it is poverty or food waste, would be a daunting task for any organisation. But groups like BuurtBuik in The Netherlands or FoodTopia in Spain explicitly choose a systemic approach. This means that they see all of these challenges as part of one problematic system. So they feel it is only natural that they tackle all of these problems at once. “Less state, more neighbourhood”, says Jesús. “We look for shared identities of our neighbours, we strive for social, political and economic ownership of people, of citizens. Our food system should be the empowering catalyst for communities of people to become once again the drivers of their own future.”

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BuurtBuik and FoodTopia make us change the way we look at the system. *Food as a system* is a financial crisis, a health care crisis, a natural crisis and a social crisis, they seem to say. The planet will not survive if we don't change the way we produce, distribute and consume food. “Our goals are to eliminate emissions and plastics from the food sector”, Jesús says. But there is more. “We also want to democratize food, make it more healthy, reduce water usage, increase the resillience of cities, eliminate social exclusion, hunger and political tension and serve as an inspiration to others.”

This seems ambitious, he agrees. “But the problem is all-encompassing and so we need equally broad solutions. Food as a whole is responsible for a large part of global energy consumption, emission of greenhouse gases, plastic pollution, deforestation, fresh water usage and waste production. For the planet, food as a system is a real problem. And the need for food in general is the cause of most conflicts and social tensions. The affect of food on our health is massive, a large part of our health problems are caused by food.”

BuurtBuik anticipates a real shift in the way people think about ‘green’ issues. “For us to really counter climate change, we must do it together”, says Suzanne, one of the coordinators of the organisation’s Utrecht-branch. “That is why our meals are always free. We turn everyone, from the guests that eat with us to the entrepreneurs who donate food, into allies in the fight for a living planet.” The Dutch organisation also tries to push this mentality shift. “We try to get people to be a part of our fight against food waste. This can be as simple as eating one of our meals. By talking about food waste we try to get people to think about what they consume and what they waste. What do they throw away and why?”

By starting small, you can make a big impact”, says Suzanne. BuurtBuik works hyper-locally, in various neighbourhoods. All over cities like Amsterdam, Utrecht and Eindhoven, there are local BuurtBuik-teams. The young people that run these teams try to change the people’s attitude towards food. They work with foods and vegetables that are not so pretty anymore, but still very much edible. However, “you cannot taste what the food used to look like”, says Suzanne. “In the end, it’s the taste that matters.”

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Foodtopia works local too. It is what makes it work. Jesús says: “We build and design factories in the heart of big cities. The innovative design makes them adapt to local urban production.” From there, they distribute the food to smaller neighbourhoods and villages. This system of hubs is geared towards increased resilience. It allows for different menus, depending on local traditions. “It also keeps our carbon footprint low”, Jesús explains. “We process our own basic materials like grains, vegetables and oils. We work with re-usable containers that people use over and over and we don’t waste food so there is very little waste.”

BuurtBuik follows a similar strategy, Suzanne says. “We use cargo bicycles to move the food around, so we don’t produce any additional emmissions. By using food that would otherwise have been thrown out, we avoid water and emmission loss and make sure those investments in food will not go to waste. We aim to cook healthy. So not only do we save food, we also make a healthy 3-course meal out of it that teaches our guests what healthy food can be. By working locally we are in close contact with our guests. Any overflow of food can be taken home, in containers they have brought from home. This was we try to not only keep food waste down, but waste in general.”

In recent years, the people driving the organisation, mostly students and refugees, have really started to make an impact on the popular discourse in the country. Policymakers and private actors now aknowledge the value of inclusive sustainability. In 2019, the municipal government of Amsterdam is creating a new food strategy that emphasizes the need for this social component to the food system. And all over The Netherlands, start-up entrepreneurs are launching businesses that focus on community wealth.

The philosophy and practice of Foodtopia and BuurtBuik represent the transformation, democratisation and politicisation of culinary culture. These are necessary steps toward an urgent ecological and social transition out of the impending social and ecological collapse. Or as Jesús puts it: “The cultural importance of food is critical to understand the ongoing ecological and social crisis. The globalization of the agro-industrial system has a harmful impact on the health of societies and ecosystems. Unfortunately, most of western food culture ignores the destructive consequences of agro-industrial practices. Cultural practices and stories focused on food neglect the intrinsic relationship between hegemonic food culture and the dominant economic and energy regime. We are still an exception, in that we are transforming food culture within neighborhoods by leading the way towards a counter -hegemonic culinary culture that is economically viable, socially desirable, and ecologically sustainable.”