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Implementation Guides February 2023

How to optimise food assistance for sustainable, food-secure cities

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In cities around the world, millions of people suffer food insecurity, hunger, malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies because of insufficient access to healthy food. Equally, many people eat an unhealthy diet that contributes to obesity, premature death and rising healthcare costs, as well as climate change.¹ This article explores strategies that cities can employ to improve the quality and use of food assistance programmes as a means to address food insecurity, while encouraging a long-term shift to sustainable diets and boosting the local food economy.

Create a governance structure to lead the city's food security work and enable collaboration between departments

Key city departments to involve in the design and delivery of the city's plan to tackle food insecurity include those for sustainability, public health, economic development, schools, waste/resource recovery and urban planning. Also involve local food businesses and non-profits in the food assistance space, including community partners with connections to priority groups. Examples of governance and cooperation structures include:

- [Quezon City's Task Force on Food Security](#), which is mandated to integrate food security into city sustainability processes and considerations.
- [Austin's Food Policy Board](#) and appointment of a Food Policy Manager to lead the development of the city's first food strategy, in coordination with a team across six city departments (sustainability,



English

- public health, parks, resource recovery, economic development and homeland security
- The FeedNYC policy committee is an alliance of city government and non-profit organisations aiming to alleviate hunger by supporting food assistance programmes. It includes the city's departments of health and social services.

Understand the landscape of food insecurity in your city

Identify priority groups and neighbourhoods for food assistance. Use data on social inequalities, nutritional outcomes and enrolment in existing food assistance and related programmes. Seek data held, for example, by city health departments and relevant national agencies. Map these data alongside healthy food retail to identify priority neighbourhoods and inform appropriate policy responses. Ideally, run or commission research on food security in the city to further understand how income disparities, gender, race, time scarcity, culture, cooking confidence and other factors impact access and attitudes to nutritious food and the uptake of food assistance.

Examples of city assessments relating to food insecurity include:

- **Melbourne's Community Food Relief 2021-2025: Planning for a food-secure city** is the city council's detailed plan for food access and affordability. It is a component of Melbourne's wider strategic Council Plan and aligns with the 2012 Melbourne Food Policy and the Health and Wellbeing 2021-2025 Plan. The evidence base includes the City of Melbourne's Social Indicators Survey, its Health and Wellbeing Profile and research commissioned into food security in the city.
- **New York City's Food Metrics Report 2021** utilises data from the federal Department of Agriculture, which monitors the extent and severity of household food insecurity in the United States through an annual survey, among other sources. It employs a 'supply gap' metric, developed by the Mayor's Office for Food Policy and partners, which tracks neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood levels of unmet food need and their supplies of food.² Research is underway to develop a food environment equity dashboard for FeedNYC, which is testing ways to disaggregate, combine and map data to measure food insecurity vulnerabilities, led by the City University of New York Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy (CUNY SPH).³
- **Austin** produces regular food-system reports outlining trends, challenges and policy changes. Click to find the 2015, 2018 and 2022 reports. Led by the city's food policy manager and informed by food-system monitoring, Austin is developing a five-year food plan for a healthy, sustainable and equitable local food system. The plan aims to advance public health, create jobs, strengthen the city's economy, reduce food transportation impacts and improve the local food system's resilience to food and water emergencies.
- **Seattle** tracks enrolment in food assistance programmes by race/ethnicity and neighbourhood to

inform ongoing work to reach those communities most burdened by food insecurity.  [Find the 2020 English](#) and [2021 impact reports here](#).

- **London** assessed city-level food insecurity as part of the wider [Survey of Londoners](#), first published in 2019 and repeated in 2022. The report found a high incidence of food insecurity among low-income households and single-parent families.



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Design food-voucher programmes to support healthier diets

Vouchers allow recipients to purchase food at supermarkets, grocery stores, farmers markets and other food retailers, according to their own tastes or preferences. Cities can use food vouchers to enable and encourage those vulnerable to food insecurity to purchase healthy food. After the initial setup, food-voucher systems typically involve low administrative expenses, offering a cost-effective approach to urban food assistance. Vouchers can also help to bolster the local food economy by supporting retailers of healthy food and the market for locally produced fruits and vegetables.

- **Provide food vouchers that can only be spent on healthy, plant-based food or which incentivise recipients to purchase such foods.** City-allocated vouchers may supplement schemes offered by other government entities or operate independently. Eligibility is usually determined by income or other socioeconomic vulnerabilities. Define and provide clear guidance on qualifying foods – whether canned or frozen food, as well as fresh food, is eligible, for example – and enrol

participating retailers.



- **Increase the availability of healthy, local purchasing options for voucher users.** Vouchers for healthy food are less likely to be redeemed if recipients cannot easily access healthy food retail outlets. Incentivise and support local food retailers to stock healthy food and to accept food vouchers, targeting retailers in underserved areas (fresh food deserts) and neighbourhoods with high levels of food insecurity. Such measures will support a shift to healthier diets across the wider population, as well as those eligible for food vouchers. Austin's Healthy Corner Stores Program, for instance, is a joint initiative by Austin's economic development and public health departments, and all participating stores accept federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. Public Health Washington, D.C.'s Healthy Food Retail Investment Fund incentivises healthy food retailers to open in underserved areas. Los Angeles' Healthy Neighbourhood Market Network programme and Good Food Zone policy support corner stores, market stalls and other healthy food providers in low-income neighbourhoods. 15-minute cities: How to create 'complete' neighbourhoods provides more advice on and examples of ways to improve the availability of healthy food in underserved neighbourhoods. Alternatively, consider offering a free bus service from underserved areas to voucher-accepting grocery stores; the North End Grocery Shuttle in Winnipeg is one example.

Seattle's food voucher programmes broaden the reach and deepen the benefits of food assistance

The Seattle Fresh Bucks programme helps residents to afford fruit and vegetables by providing funds on a Fresh Bucks Card or app to be spent at participating farmers markets, independent grocers and supermarkets. It serves low-income, mostly African American residents who are vulnerable to food insecurity, including those who do not qualify for SNAP federal benefits. It is partially funded by Seattle's sweetened beverage tax. Another scheme, Seattle SNAP Match, allows recipients of SNAP payments to increase their purchasing power when they buy fruits and vegetables – for example, offering an extra US\$5 for every US\$10 spent on fruit and vegetables from participating retailers.



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Integrate requirements for healthy, sustainable food into procurement guidelines for food assistance programmes

Direct meal provision is used to provide food assistance to the most vulnerable people, who often lack the space, equipment or ability to cook food for themselves. Common service examples include soup kitchens, meal programmes for elderly and/or isolated people, and school feeding programmes. **Food parcels** are packages of ingredients that have been historically used for humanitarian intervention in times of emergency. Food parcels may be more impactful than food vouchers in neighbourhoods with limited access to healthy food retail.

Accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, some cities are utilising food-parcel services as a means to offer regular food assistance, while also reducing food waste from unsold food. Both services are typically delivered in partnership with or contracted through non-profit, community-based organisations.

Cities can maximise the benefits of these services for health, the local food economy and the climate by ensuring they offer healthy, sustainable food and designing them to encourage lasting change.

- **Require or prioritise plant-based foods in food assistance programmes.** Cities can set procurement guidelines to ensure ingredients and meals provided by these services are healthy and sustainable, and ideally sourced from organic agriculture.

- **Recover and use unsold food from retailers and restaurants in food assistance** a third of all food produced globally is either lost or wasted. Wasted food is a waste of the labour, water, energy, land and other resources that went into producing it, and its decomposition in landfill is an important source of emissions.⁴ *How cities can reduce food waste by households and businesses* provides examples of policies that require and enable safe donation by food retailers, which have high potential for food rescue, as well as restaurants and other food businesses. Cities can then connect food donation with food assistance services.
- **Use food assistance to encourage a lasting shift towards healthy, plant-based diets.** Research has shown that when people eat a high volume of fruits and vegetables for a sustained period, their consumption preferences change to favour fruits and vegetables. In the United States, municipal government departments and institutions, such as the City of Sioux Falls Health Department and Denver Public Housing, have partnered with the Partnership for a Healthier America's (PHA) Good Food for All programme to provide food assistance aligned with this concept.⁵ The programme enrolls households facing food insecurity in a 12-week food-parcel programme, providing fruits and vegetables to support longer-term behavioural change. By the end of the free food provision, more than half of participants had increased their food and vegetable consumption and over 85% were willing to pay for a box of fruit and vegetables.⁶

Good Food for All



Conduct communication and educational campaigns to drive the enrolment of those eligible



for food assistance

Not all of those who are eligible for food assistance will seek it out. Cities can increase usership by lifting administrative burdens and running campaigns to help to remove stigma around receiving food assistance. For example, Boston used a community grant programme to combat food assistance stigma. The city worked with a community-based organisation to increase use, awareness and access to food assistance programmes and resources. The city also digitalised the system, enabling access for more people and accelerating processing times for receiving food assistance. The city also published the Mayor's Food Access Agenda, promoting the resources and programmes available.

Support urban agriculture and connect it with food assistance

Urban farms and community gardens can support food education and provide other social benefits, as well as produce food for use in food assistance.⁷ Such farms or gardens are often run by community organisations, but can be supported by city governments and connected with the city's food education and assistance programmes. One example is Quezon City's GrowQC, run by a partnership involving 12 city departments, agricultural businesses, farmers' organisations and civil society organisations. GrowQC is converting unused urban land into productive farms and aquaculture units with the aim of improving the availability of nutritious food. It distributes seed starter kits for vegetable nurseries, supports agricultural training and has opened a community soup kitchen. It began during the pandemic and, due to its success, continues; it now supports more than 300 urban farms.⁸



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