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Policy Briefs February 2023

Why cities should support access to healthy, sustainable food for all

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Originally Published: September 2019

Author(s): C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, C40 Knowledge Hub

Food systems have a major impact on climate change and public health. Cities can play an important role in building more sustainable food systems and helping their residents to eat a healthier diet. This article explains why this shift is worth pursuing.

Food consumption accounts for around 13% of cities' greenhouse gas emissions – mostly from animal-sourced food

Food production is one of the biggest drivers of environmental change. It is a major contributor to biodiversity loss, freshwater use, change in land use and deforestation. It produces large quantities of nitrous oxide (N_2O) and methane (CH_4), both of which are very powerful greenhouse gases (GHG), as well as smaller quantities of carbon dioxide (CO_2).

With more than half of the global population living in urban areas, cities consume a vast amount of food grown – making food a **major contributor to cities' consumption-based GHG emissions**. Across C40 cities, food consumption accounts for an estimated 13% of total GHG emissions.¹ The figure differs between cities, but this estimate will be indicative for many cities.

Roughly 75% of food emissions are related to the consumption of animal-sourced food.² Animal-sourced food consumption is far more emissions-intensive because it includes livestock emissions as well as emissions from the crops grown to feed the livestock.

Without substantial changes to the way we eat, GHG emissions from the food sector are expected to increase 38% by 2050.³



Improving equity in food consumption has significant health and economic benefits for people and cities

In cities around the world, millions of people suffer food insecurity, hunger, malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies because of insufficient access to food. This has significant impacts on their health as hunger and malnutrition make the body weaker and more vulnerable to disease and infections. In turn, these health impacts have knock on effects on children's education, workplace productivity, and cities' economies.

In London, for example, around 16% of adults and 14% of children experience food insecurity, with single-parent families among the most at risk.⁴ In the Kansas City Metro Area, 13% of households are food insecure, a figure that rises to 30% for single-parent families.⁵ The figure is much higher in many global south cities.

At the same time, many people eat an unhealthy diet that contributes to obesity, premature death and rising healthcare costs.⁶ Under-consumption of fruits, vegetables, nuts and legumes, and over-consumption of red meat, dairy⁷ and foods that are ultra-processed and/or high in fat, sugar and salt⁸ are associated with chronic illnesses such as coronary heart disease, strokes, cancer and type-two diabetes.

Too often, access and affordability limit citizen's ability to make good food choices, and food marketing often encourages unhealthy eating. Cities can play an important role in addressing these issues.



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Food waste is an expensive waste of human and natural resources

Around a third of all food produced globally is either lost or wasted. This is estimated to be worth more than US \$900 billion, roughly equivalent to the annual GDP of Indonesia or the Netherlands.⁹ At the household level, the percentage of food purchased that ends up in landfill varies from around 4% in Denmark or Japan to over 20% in Canada and the United States.¹⁰

Wasted food is a waste of the labour, water, energy, land and other resources that went into producing it.¹¹ For example in the United States, roughly 20% of cropland, fertilisers and agricultural water is used to produce food that is ultimately wasted.¹²

Food makes up over half of most cities' municipal waste stream, up to 80% in some cities, driving up solid waste management costs. As a result, food waste is also the largest contributor to cities' GHG emissions from the waste sector.¹³

Reducing food waste by recovering and donating surplus food to people in need helps to improve equity and reduce food insecurity, especially when integrated with food assistance programmes.

Cities have a vital role to play in building healthy, sustainable food



systems

Ambitious cities are already working to help residents to eat more healthily and sustainably- a diet sometimes called the Planetary Health Diet (see box below). Cities can support better food consumption and food systems through:

- **Using municipal food procurement.** Where city governments directly purchase food that is served in schools, hospitals and other public institutions, they can ensure that those meals are healthy and sustainable, and ideally sourced from organic agriculture.
- **Making good foods the easier, more attractive and affordable option** (also referred to as creating a ‘sustainable food environment’). Cities can promote the consumption of balanced nutritious diets, influence food distribution, availability and affordability of different foods, and regulate food advertisements in public spaces. Cities can also introduce or expand food assistance programmes that prioritise healthy, sustainable foods to tackle food insecurity and boost the local food economy.
- **Reducing food loss and waste, and improving the circularity of the local food system.** Cities can set a target for a 50% reduction from their baseline. By separately collecting and treating residual food waste, rather than sending it to landfill, cities can also produce compost for parks and farmers in the city and wider region, as well as natural gas and other valuable outputs.

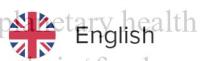
The Planetary Health Diet

The Planetary Health Diet involves eating lots of fruit, vegetables, nuts and legumes, and smaller amounts of animal-sourced and highly-processed food. Specifically, it is a balanced and nutritious diet which provides each adult up to 2,500 calories a day, includes no more than 16kg of meat per year (or around 300g per week) and 90kg of dairy per year (or around 250g per day).

Widespread transition to the Planetary Health Diet would dramatically reduce food sector emissions and enable the global food system to provide a balanced, nutritional diet for 10 billion people. It would also save 11 million lives every year due to the reduced impact of diet-related diseases.

For more information about the Planetary Health Diet and the research that underpins it, read the EAT and Lancet Commission’s *Food in the Anthropocene*, and C40, Arup and the University of Leeds’ *Addressing food-related consumption-based emissions in C40 Cities*.

Cities making ambitious food commitments



As signatories to the C40 Good Food Cities Accelerator, 14 cities have pledged to achieve a healthy diet for all citizens by 2030. Cities have committed to use their procurement powers, improve their ‘food environments’ and reduce food loss and waste. They will work with citizens, businesses, public institutions and other organisations to develop a joint strategy to implement these measures, achieve these goals inclusively and equitably, and incorporate the strategy into their climate action plans.

In addition, 199 cities are collaborating and taking action under the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, which defines 37 recommended actions in food governance, sustainable diets and nutrition, food supply and distribution, food waste reduction and other categories.

Working with other cities through networks and campaigns offers a peer group, greater influence and other benefits. The Declaration and the Pact are both open to new signatory cities. Large public and private facilities serving food can also join the Cool Food Pledge to support and raise awareness of their efforts to improve food procurement.

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