

Why we need food policies

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I am writing this in Italy at the end of a month of meetings and conferences that have been taking place alongside the final hurrah for EXPO. The Universal Exposition 2015, which has been attracting huge crowds during October, was constructed around the theme of 'Feeding the Planet – Energy for Life' and while sustainability may have been an ambiguous aspect of the event (many of the Big Food corporations had their own pavilions) it has nevertheless triggered considerable policy debate across the country. One of the big set-piece, tie-in events was the signing on 15th October by representatives of 116 cities from 58 countries of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact. Meanwhile, the cities of both Milan and Turin are busily engaged in putting in place comprehensive metropolitan food planning policies; and, encouragingly, last week saw the Regional Government of Lombardy pass legislation enshrining the 'Right to Food' for its citizens. These are all very encouraging developments which I hope cities elsewhere in Europe – and especially in Ireland – will pay attention to. However, passing laws and devising food policies is only one aspect of the complex equation that might deliver a sustainable, socially inclusive food system capable of ensuring nutritional wellbeing to local populations. This was one of the key themes that I raised during keynote lectures that I was invited to deliver at a number of conferences during the past month.

From the American University in Rome to the University of Bergamo (where I was a visiting research fellow for 17 days) and at places in between (Turin, Monza, Bra) I found a strong interest amongst conference participants made up of academics, social activists, graduate students and urban planners in exploring ways by which local-level food strategies might be developed. At these gatherings I spoke about food policy councils as an organizational initiative that has the potential to bridge the gap between food producers and consumers, a gap that has, for example, been steadily growing in Ireland – with a few notable exceptions - over recent years. Finding ways of reconnecting people with their food has been a dominant feature of the new food social movement and while there has been some real success stories – the GAS groups in Italy being one, on which more below – elsewhere it is clear we need some institutional supports to help bridge this gap and support a transition toward a more sustainable system.

Food policy councils have been around since the early 1980s, though mainly in North America where they were seen as an attempt to address a dysfunctional food system marked by sharp inequalities and unhealthy eating practices. Cities like Toronto and San Francisco have established a place for food policy-making at the heart of City Hall where

efforts to tackle food poverty and dietary ill-health are also accompanied by measures to celebrate and promote the different food cultures and culinary traditions found amongst their citizens. Above all, food policy councils seek to address many of the paradoxes of our food systems: a growing abundance of food from all over the world on our shelves yet increasing incidence of food poverty; one in eight families in Ireland cannot afford a healthy food basket. And while the number of food banks is growing, at household level we throw away at least 30 percent of our food. More worryingly, a recent WHO report suggested that Ireland was on course to become the fattest nation in Europe. At the same time we have an agricultural strategy that is busy supporting food exports, yet increasing numbers of farmers are struggling to survive financially; and while this same strategy is loudly proclaiming our green credentials, we have the highest emissions of greenhouse gases per capita in Europe. The food system is consequently beset by huge contradictions, which is why taking a food policy approach helps us to address some of these profound flaws at a city-regional level and to find ways by which local people can become more empowered to choose ethical options and to eat better.

In Cork a few of us decided to establish a Food Policy Council during the summer of 2013. Working in collaboration with the Cork Healthy City initiative, a WHO programme through which the City has received designation, we have undertaken a number of activities hoping to develop greater city-wide interest in food. The CFPC was formally launched by the Lord Mayor at a 'Feed the City' event over the St Patrick's weekend 2014, when we handed out 5,000 bowls of vegetable curry to the public. Sourcing one tonne of vegetables from Meades in Co. Meath who freely donated this food that would otherwise have gone to landfill, and with one hundred culinary arts students in CIT improving their knife skills while undertaking the prepping, the food was cooked by our friends from the Hare Krishna temple in London, who seem to own the largest pots in the British Isles! The event also saw cookery demonstrations by Denis Cotter and Mercy Fenton, as well as other informative and entertainment activities particularly highlighting the problem of food waste. We have also been involved in supporting the annual Street Feast day over the last two years, preceded by a flash feast event a couple of weeks beforehand designed to attract publicity and interest. But it is not just about creating spectacles, important though these are in drawing attention to issues such as food waste or encouraging conviviality. Rather, we really do want to make a difference to the way people connect with their food.

Consequently, following a submission to the consultation exercise ahead of the new Cork Development Plan, we are pleased that the City Council incorporated a commitment to increasing the area of food growing space across the city. Working with the Planning Department we are now looking to identify potential sites around the city which might be utilised for community food growing schemes. Already one city centre site has been reclaimed as a growing space and given over to a mental health charity for the therapeutic benefit of its clients. As part of this exercise we will be hosting a workshop on 13th November that will attract representatives from a range of food growing initiatives who

together can begin to identify the obstacles, needs and possibilities for the city and wider region. We believe that food growing has the potential to reconnect people to their local ecology and to each other as well as improve the supply of fresh produce to the kitchen table. Yet we also have much to learn from others about alternative ways of sourcing our food.

While much has been made in recent times of the ‘sharing economy’ - invariably described in relation to Air B’nB and Uber – in Italy a more genuinely collaborative solidarity economy can be found amongst the proliferation of GAS groups throughout the country. *Gruppi d’Aquistò Solidali*, solidarity purchasing groups, have grown significantly over the last decade and numbered around one thousand by the end of 2014. Essentially, these groups are established by people to buy food and other commonly used goods directly from producers at prices that are fair to both parties. They are not just *collective purchasing* groups that use the benefit of scale to get the cheapest prices: rather they seek to build an alternative to the prevailing model of consumerism. In this regard they favour local products to reduce transportation; organic agriculture over conventional; fair trade to assist distant producers; and eco-compatible (biodegradable, reusable) goods wherever possible. Each member of the group has responsibility to buy one item on behalf of everyone else which means arranging its collection (or delivery by the producer) and distribution to other members of the group. This time-consuming task means, of course, a level of commitment that goes well beyond the simple matter of procuring household needs. It speaks of an effort to build a new collective experience around food that will contribute to developing local and regional solutions to sustainability challenges.

Initiatives such as the GAS in Italy demonstrate the power and potential of moving beyond the narrow individualism associated with the prevailing economy of consumerism and towards a more collective engagement with the environmental and social challenges that face us. It may be difficult to imagine replicating the GAS model in Ireland, but there is no doubt that we urgently need to encourage greater social innovation in our food provisioning /retailing system as well as in our food consumption practices. In Cork we hope that the Food Policy Council might serve as the first step in building a civic conversation around our food system and provide a basis to explore options for improvement. Ultimately, both urban eaters and rural farmers need to find ways of developing closer cooperation to the benefit of both.