Re-Scaling the Politics of Food: Place-Based Urban Food Governance in the UK

Abstract

Drawing upon Urban Political Ecology and recent developments around place-based approaches to food security, this article examines how various urban food coalitions in the United Kingdom (UK) are acting to influence their local food environment and forge more sustainable socio-ecological relations within a highly unequal, contested and multi-scalar governance and policy context. An exploratory qualitative case study approach was utilised, drawing on fifteen semi-structured interviews with food partnership coordinators and on secondary data, to examine the differential priorities, internal contestations and capacity of socio-spatial assemblages to reconfigure socio-ecological relations. Our analysis uncovers an emerging (uneven) geography of urban food governance in the UK, pointing to the role of micro-politics in constraining the transformative and emancipatory potential of food partnerships. On this basis, we argue for a *critical geography* of urban food governance that highlights the importance of the political and economic context and spatial imaginary in shaping the contingent and relational character of place-based food partnerships and their capacity to engender systemic change.

Key Words: cities, urban food governance, urban food security, urban political ecology, food politics, sustainable food systems.

1. Introduction

Critical theorists have long emphasized the urban[1] as a site where the consequences of unjust socionatural processes are compounded and most visible (c.f. Lefebvre, 2003; Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003; Heynen et al., 2006). The (re-)framing of food as an urban issue (Blay-Palmer, 2009; Bedore, 2010) and, therefore, a crucial prism to examine human-environment relationships and governance dynamics across interconnected scales (from the body to the global) draws attention to the role of food as one of the most intimate "socionatures" (Alkon, 2013). Indeed, food circulates through bodies, infrastructures and discourses and dialectically transforms through socio-environmental processes, creating highly unequal outcomes both between places and between people (Heynen, 2006). Food, therefore, is a terrain where contestations over power, control, the role of the state, public policy and collective action unfold and are negotiated through complex multi-level governance processes and arrangements (Barling and Lang, 2003).

Food scholars are examining the ways in which more collaborative governance arrangements can reconfigure broader food system dynamics and unjust socionatural relations (Morgan, 2015a). As Candel (2014) highlights, the dominant narrative has tended to embody an overwhelming optimistic stance in relation to food governance innovations, overlooking the tensions, conflicts and power dynamics that permeate policy configurations. To progress this debate, there is then a need to critically analyze the micro-politics of "the heterogeneous on-the-ground realities of policy implementation and resource use" (Cornea et al., 2017: 8) -- the everyday political dynamics that are shaping the new food governance spaces. What are the geometries of power, political imaginaries and priorities at play in the emerging realm of urban food governance? Are such geometries, imaginaries and priorities silencing alternative knowledges and marginalising some actors or trajectories? More generally: are we witnessing the

[1] We understand 'the urban' as a process -- a node through which multiple metabolic flows between 'nature' and 'society' interchange, coalesce and interact (Cronon, 1991).

unfolding of (another) uneven geography of food based on the differential social, economic, political and cultural capacity of various actors and places to act?

To begin to address these questions, in this article we politicize urban food debates through a *critical geography* of place-based food governance that examines the ways in which different socio-ecological contexts select or even privilege particular priorities, actors and interventions – or, more broadly, the ways in which food policy developments are circulated, (re-)interpreted and (re-)assembled within particular places. Through the prism of urban political ecology (UPE), we analyze data collected in the United Kingdom (UK) -- one of the earliest countries to engage with urban food governance through the formation of 'food partnerships', or spaces of policy deliberation where multiple actors envisage, develop and seek to enact place-based solutions to complex food-related socio-ecological challenges (Morgan, 2009; Moragues-Faus and Morgan, 2015). Our analysis reveals that such spaces overlap with existing arrangements, programmes and organizational structures that are attempting to alter the institutional landscape of food policy in the UK. By opportunistically and strategically working within the cracks of multi-level governance institutions and processes, food partnerships selectively enrol policy entrepreneurs and food champions to provide place-based responses to multi-scalar socio-ecological challenges. However, the limited capacity, variable priorities and internal contestations of the emerging food partnerships highlight that 'rescaling' is not a unidirectional (vertical) process but, rather, a complex web of multi-level entanglements of actors, discourses, campaigns and priorities. This key finding raises important questions about the differential social, economic, political and cultural capacity of various stakeholders and places to assemble and develop more just and sustainable urban foodscapes.

2. The Rise of Urban Food Governance: A Review

Over the last two decades, the (re-)articulation of the symbiotic relationship between urbanization processes and food systems has received increased attention from a range of academic disciplines, which have sought to demonstrate the multifarious ways in which food shapes the materiality, culture and embodied experiences of cities (Pothukuchi and Kaufman, 2000; Steel, 2008; Lim, 2014). With the majority of the world's population now living in 'urban' areas, scholarly attention has concentrated, in particular, on the role of cities in both perpetuating and addressing interconnected social, environmental and economic injustices that reproduce food insecurity (Morgan and Sonnino, 2010). Research has focused primarily on cities' efforts to develop participatory governance arrangements (Morgan, 2009) that prioritize health, food security and environmental sustainability for participatory action (Marsden and Sonnino, 2012). A range of food governance mechanisms (such as formalized food policy councils) have been analyzed in North America (Blay-Palmer, 2009; Mah and Thang, 2012; MacRae and Donahue, 2013), Europe (Moragues-Faus and Morgan, 2015; Morgan, 2015a; Cretella, 2016) and Latin America (Rocha and Lessa, 2009; Ashe and Sonnino, 2013). Characterised as being part of a broader "quiet revolution" seeking to put "good food on the political agenda" (Morgan, 2015b: 7), such mechanisms are argued to reflect the seeds of change in urban food governance (Blay-Palmer et al., 2016; Mendes and Sonnino, 2018) in a broader policy vacuum created by national policies that remain orientated towards a productivist agribusiness paradigm (Morgan, 2015a) under the 'corporate food regime' (McMichael, 2013).

Given the democratic deficit of the globalized food system, most literature contains a notable advocacy tone in highlighting the potential of participatory processes to facilitate greater transparency and citizen engagement with food policy (Hassanein, 2003; Levkoe, 2011), develop synergies between diverse stakeholders and policy domains (Wiskerke, 2009) and support sustainable food planning (Sonnino, 2009;

Mah and Thang, 2012). This normative characterisation ignores the political tensions that usually permeate governance processes (Swyngedouw, 2005, 2009) and fails to critically examine the exclusionary practices, power dynamics and contestations that are embedded in these new institutional configurations. Indeed, research has not yet provided critical discussions about the implications of urban food policies in relation to the uneven spatial development dynamics of capitalism across various scales and sites (Smith, 2010 [1984]) and the inequitable access to resources and power amongst multiple actors, organizations and regions (Swyngedouw, 2005) (for exceptions, see Bedore, 2014 and Cretella and Buenger, 2016). As highlighted by Mansfield and Mendes (2013), there are significant procedural and structural factors that affect the capacity of local governments to implement urban food polices (see also Mendes, 2008). For example, some research has demonstrated that cities with particularly active urban food policy partnerships tend to rely on highly skilled public servants or engaged civil society organizations (CSOs) (see Moragues-Faus and Morgan, 2015).

Environmental governance literature has demonstrated that the rolling out of various collaborative partnerships – or 'joined-up' and 'participatory' governance – aligns with the notion of an 'urban sustainability fix' (While et al., 2004; Gibbs and Lintz, 2016) through the downloading of responsibility under neoliberal ecological modernization -- by which cities selectively incorporate environmental objectives in the 'greening' of urban governance to deal with the contradictions and crises of capitalism. This raises the question of whether urban food governance mechanisms are forms of institutional 'food-fixes' that seek to address some of the negative externalities (such as diet-related ill-health) of the capitalist food system through multi-actor and place-based collaborative coalitions. As identified by Peck and Tickell (2002), the dialectical "rolling back" of the state and "rolling out" of a range of pluralistic and hybrid governance arrangements under neoliberal political economies has enabled a range of CSOs and non-state actors to take on more expansive roles in governance processes. However, a strong critique of these governance and policy processes has been articulated based on their continued prioritisation of

economic growth (to the detriment of social equity) and their failure to enhance inclusive civic engagement (Harvey, 1989; Purcell, 2006). An example here is provided by private-public partnerships based on consensual governing and policy-making, which depoliticize oppositional voices (Swyngedouw, 2005, 2009).

In the context of the recent proliferation of collaborative urban food governance arrangements across the global North, neoliberal dynamics of state restructuring (which have intensified since the 2007-8 financial crisis) raise the question of whether we are witnessing a transferal (or downscaling) of state responsibility to (under-funded and under-resourced) multi-sector food partnerships (a process that Peck and Tickell (2002: 386) refer to as "responsibility without power") -- under the guise of "food democracy" (Hassanein, 2003). Indeed, we know very little in terms of how food partnerships are contextually positioned within the overall geography of austerity, reduced local authority budgets and the everyday micro-politics related to the (re-)negotiation of roles and responsibilities in multi-actor food coalitions. Clearly, there is a need for greater comparative research in relation to the power dynamics, institutional arrangements and interactions between different levels of government and the shifting boundaries of accountability and power between public, private and civil society actors (Mansfield and Mendes, 2013). As Candel (2014) emphasizes, a crucial step in this direction is greater empirical investigation of current or emerging governance configurations (rather than idealized or desired arrangements) in different contexts.

Drawing upon UPE and place-based understandings of food politics, this article seeks to enrich existing literature on urban food governance by examining the (subtle) power relations that exist within and between food partnership configurations and wider socio-political networks of power. Specifically, we focus on the power dynamics, institutional obstacles and diverse agendas embedded in the 'innovative' food governance (re-)configurations to understand whether the rescaling of food governance is contributing to the unfolding of an uneven geography of 'winning' and 'losing' urban areas.

The UK provides a particularly pertinent context to examine this emerging geography. As one of the first countries to develop innovative urban food governance arrangements, the UK constitutes a productive terrain to examine how food policy developments are circulated, (re-)interpreted and (re-)assembled. At the same time, the asymmetrical nature of national devolution[2] in the UK (Mackinnon, 2015) and the distinctive policy approaches that have emerged in relation to devolved competencies[3] and the global financial crisis, link with broader debates about state rescaling and the interaction of places and networks in multi-level governance dynamics. Examining the complex interplay between political capacity, material and affective resources, spatial imaginary and the micro-politics that shape place-based food partnerships can inform understandings of the ongoing processes of innovative urban food governance beyond the UK.

3. Towards a Diversified Urban Political Ecology of Urban Food Governance

Across the global North, national food policy generally remains locked in thematic silos, predominantly orientated around productivist frameworks that prioritise market-based, technological solutions and agricultural intensification (Lang et al., 2009). In this context, as scholars have documented (Levkoe, 2011; Morgan, 2015a; Sonnino, 2016), urban areas have become the main focus of food policy and co-governance arrangements that are allegedly embodying a broader shift from (top-down) government to (collaborative) governance, blurring the lines between the presumed differences, roles and responsibilities of the state, civil society and the market (Harvey, 1989, 2007). Due to its non-binding decision-making structure, governance places emphasis on *policies, rather than politics* (Mouffe, 2005),

[2] Instigated in 1997 by the then Labour Government, UK devolution is an unfolding process, rather than a single 'event' (MacKinnon, 2015), leading to a separation of powers between the UK Parliament and the devolved administrations (in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland), which have distinct and independent departmental structures, civil services and devolved competencies. England is governed centrally by the UK Parliament – effectively fusing the UK and English political institutions.

[3] Such as health, housing, planning, economic development, transport, the environment, and agriculture, forestry and fisheries.

and it does so within an increasingly complex neoliberal policy landscape, where control and competencies have been transferred both vertically (upwards to supranational organizations and downwards to devolved localities and regions) and horizontally (to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), public-private partnerships or private bodies) (Pincetl, 2010).

Within a wider context of socio-spatial inequality and networked layers of governance, there is a need to problematize innovative and more 'participatory' governance arrangements, which can generate contradictory tendencies. New forms of 'governance-beyond-the-state' may reduce transparency, accountability and suffer from oblique representation (Swyngedouw, 2005), where 'sustainability' signifies a consensus frame and post-political condition in which disagreement is limited (Swyngedouw, 2007). In relation to food, for example, scholarship, as identified by Candel (2014), tends to reproduce a problematic narrative in which governance[4] is discussed as merely a problem-solving mechanism. A critical disposition also questions whether food partnerships and their associated policy instruments can move beyond being spatially variable socio-ecological 'fixes' and make a substantial difference to reassembling the dominant food system and address complex food policy challenges (Sonnino, 2016; Sonnino et al., 2018). This would entail creating platforms for political contestation, strengthening alliances for broader transformative social change and providing experimental spaces to politicize food insecurity by challenging the individualization of hunger (Jarosz, 2011) and the pervasive tendency to conflate local food systems with more socio-ecologically just and sustainable outcomes (Born and Purcell, 2006).

To contribute to the development of a more critical scholarship on food governance, we draw on UPE -- a perspective that emphasizes the institutional power dynamics and the diverse politics that shape decision-making processes and environments (Cornea et al., 2017), raising crucial questions concerning who holds power, whose voice is heard and who is (dis-)empowered (Heynen et al., 2006) within urban food policy

[4] In this article, governance is understood as set of multi-scalar (formal and informal) political practices, processes and interactions between an array of stakeholders that seek to steer and guide society in specific directions.

arrangements. UPE has been instrumental in politicizing socionatural processes and highlighting the uneven production of urban environments (Heynen et al., 2006). However, as noted by several scholars, UPE scholarship has tended to have very little material impact on urban policies (Walker, 2006) and "has not translated into a more equitable distribution of social power in practice" (Cornea et al., 2017: 8).

Over time, UPE scholarship has diversified its theoretical and empirical focus from the 'first wave' of predominantly neo-Marxist framed investigations (Heynen, 2014) to draw on feminist and poststructural conceptualisations of power (Grove, 2009; Gabriel, 2014) as relational, dispersed and exercised through practices (c.f. Foucault, 1982; see also Lawhon et al., 2014). This theoretically heterogeneous scholarship has provided the basis for more 'situated' studies that pay greater attention to ordinary, mundane practices - the micro-politics and the power dynamics between various axes of difference and groups that shape the socionatural metabolism of everyday life (Truelove, 2011; Loftus, 2012; Shillington, 2013; Lawhon et al., 2014; Doshi, 2017). This orientation entails remaining attentive to the suppressing constraints of structural relations that (re-)produce unjust urban ecologies, but also being hopeful in searching for new political openings, everyday forms of resistance and more equitable socio-political configurations (see Rocheleau et al., 1996).

UPE can offer important insights into the deeply political processes that shape the social, environmental and economic relations that contextualise food governance at various spatio-temporal scales. Drawing attention to the more mundane, networked governance processes and politics (Cornea et al., 2017) surrounding how "the city's imaginative form is reshaped and mobilised" (Mendes, 2008: 945) and understanding civil society as differentiated and heterogeneous in a context of reflexive localism, whereby citizens engage with multiple forms of political activity (c.f. Leonard, 2012), UPE provides a unique critical framework to capture the ways in which new spaces, or political ecologies of food governance, emerge and are continually negotiated. Rather than examining multi-actor food partnerships in terms of a homogenising governance 'regime' or monolithic neoliberal strategies, a situated UPE governance

perspective draws attention to the diverse and complex informal interplay between local state, private and civil society actors in contested, place-based contexts (Cornea et al., 2017), where neoliberalism is a variegated, contingent and unevenly realized process (Peck and Tickell, 2002).

The geographically uneven nature of development in and between cities, and the proclivity of neoliberal governance processes to constitute localities as competitors at multiple scales (Peck and Tickell, 2002), raise the danger of an uneven geography of urban food governance emerging globally as a consequence of several factors. These include, for example, the differential organizing capacity of civil society, the tendency of food activism to be clustered around specific 'pioneer' cities, the role of translocal policy[5] in enrolling some places as innovators over others, in addition to austerity cuts and a shrinking state, which affect the level of local involvement in food partnerships. Such factors draw attention towards the broader political and economic relations that position some places as 'global' hotspots of innovation and leadership and others as marginal (Massey, 2005) – in other words, towards spatial justice (Soja, 2010).

In sum, a conceptual framework that brings UPE into conversation with place-based approaches to food policy provides a critical lens to examine how various actors work to gain greater collective control over food systems, while helping to uncover relationships of (micro-)power that can constrain the emancipatory potential of such attempts. In other words, it focuses attention towards the power and politics of diverse everyday governance modalities (Cornea et al., 2017) that are shaped by local contingencies in broader 'landscapes of antagonism' (Newman, 2014), highlighting the ambiguity and opportunities of new associations of actors, agendas and power relations.

[5] One example is the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, implemented in 2015 and signed by more than 180 cities worldwide, which laid the foundation for the first globally integrated urban food policy agenda.

4. Methodology

The article adopts an exploratory qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2009) to provide a comparative analysis of food partnerships – alliances of local government, civil society and private sector actors, as described earlier – throughout the UK. Data collection methods included in-depth semi-structured interviews and the analysis of key policy documents from each food partnership. In total, fifteen interviews were conducted throughout 2016-17 with the coordinators of twelve food partnerships and representatives from the NGOs that initiated and coordinate the broader UK Sustainable Food Cities Network (SFCN)[6]. The selected food partnerships span all the devolved nations of the UK (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) and cover a range of spatial dynamics (i.e., city, town, county and borough levels). Although they are all in their early stages of development (the oldest dating to 2004), the analysis of localized collaborative food policy approaches in a context of political-economic instability, increasing food insecurity and rapid urbanization can provide important insights into the governance processes and practices that are unfolding rapidly across the global North.

Semi-structured interviews with the representatives of the NGOs that initiated and currently coordinate the SFCN examined the origins and evolution of the network, how it operates in the national context, future aspirations and multi-scalar linkages. Interviews with food partnership coordinators covered the development of the food partnership, its governance structure, institutional arrangements and participatory dynamics, in addition to its priorities, challenges and aspirations for the future. In particular, questions focused on the power relations existing in the diverse political-economic contexts of the devolved regions of the UK to understand how food partnerships are tackling food insecurity, their politics of participation, their tendency to subvert or reproduce geometries of power, and the political and spatial

[6] All 12 case study food partnerships are members of the SFCN, a translocal alliance initiative coordinated by the Soil Association, Sustain and Food Matters, which connects 57 local partnerships (as of November 2018) committed to creating more sustainable food systems.

imaginaries deployed. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and then open-coded through inductive analysis to identify key themes related to the everyday micro-politics[7] of place-based food governance and the opportunities and challenges of rescaling efforts to tackle food insecurity. As described in Table 1, to maintain anonymity and ensure confidentiality, the term 'Food Partnership Coordinator' (FPC), followed by a number (e.g., FPC1), is utilised to categorise different interviewees' comments. Verbatim quotation extracts were selected as they represented recurring themes that illustrate the distinct power geometries embedded in food partnerships. Since stakeholders continue to play an active role in the case study food partnerships, specific places are not identified.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

To contextualise our in-depth interviews, the analysis of secondary data (particularly policy documents) was undertaken for each case study partnership and the broader SFCN.

5. Results

5.1 Tackling Urban Food Insecurity through a Place-Based Approach

Interviews with key stakeholders revealed the importance of the distinctive socio-spatial context of places in shaping the priorities of food partnerships. Indeed, it was the embodied experiences and the intimate knowledge that stakeholders possessed with regard to local politics, existing institutional arrangements and the historically engrained micro-geographies of place that enabled them to navigate complex socio-political terrains and foster cooperative alliances between a range of CSOs and representatives from the public and private sectors. As a FPC explained: "*as with all cities, sometimes the history of the city gets in*

[7] Crucially, the 'micro' political is "not synonymous with the small or local" (Anderson, 2017: 594) but draws attention to how power operates through mundane and everyday practices and interactions.

the way a little bit"; therefore, "*food is used as a way of connecting people from different cultures, languages, religions, etc.*" (FPC1).

Those who work with places that face complex socio-economic problems prioritize tackling food poverty by improving access to healthy, affordable food. As a FPC clarified:

> "*…food security in terms of how it comes into play in [the city] is, I think, food poverty. I think that is our focus and we prefer to call it food access, so it's about access to nutritious and healthy food and fresh food for everybody in the city, so it's not just the privileged few who live in the leafy suburbs*" (FPC1).

This focus was usually justified and conveyed by providing various references to the Index of Multiple Deprivation (and the devolved nation equivalents):

> "*the food poverty work and food insecurity work, there is a lot of stuff that has happened […], it's fairly well documented that [the town] is very economically deprived and has some of the worst, you know, the highest number of wards, in the sort of top 10 deprived*" (FPC2).

The focus on food poverty[8] is placed in a broader political-economic climate of inequality, austerity and welfare reform, which has had a differential impact across local authorities, particularly in England, as described by a FPC:

> "*… [the city] has been very hard hit by the Conservative Government's funding cuts and we have less money to manage worse deprivation than the rest of the country, so we have one of the highest levels of deprivation and need […] but our budgets have been slashed almost quite scarily*" (FPC1).

[8] Food poverty is commonly defined as the inability to afford or access a sufficient amount of adequate food for a healthy diet (Dowler, 2002; Sonnino and Hanmer, 2016).

The power geometry that is generated by a Conservative UK Government imposing austerity measures onto local authorities[9] has created antagonist relationships and negatively influenced the level of leading and steering that can be enacted by the local state. In this context, the devolved nations have implemented various packages to encumber the (short-term) effects of welfare reform, as a FPC explained in relation to Northern Ireland:

> "*Now in a way, we're quite lucky because we've got one of the best welfare mitigation packages across the entire UK. The government […] ring-fenced £500 million, so half a billion pounds, to mitigate the impact of this*" (FPC3).

As interviewees emphasized, in general, the ideological differences between the UK Government and the devolved nations have broadened in relation to the new wave of 'roll back' neoliberalism enacted by austerity welfare reform that has attacked collective entitlements and pursued a pervasive agenda of funding cuts, privatisation and organizational downsizing. The different national political-economic context also shapes the type of social action and advocacy work that food partnerships can engage in:

> "*… we've had a lot of very difficult issues in Northern Ireland in the past year or two. Firstly, we don't have a government to lobby, so our policy side has been completely defunct for nearly 12 months, which is absolutely disgusting. [Secondly, the council] has been going through RPA [Review of Public Administration] […] which brought with it loads of structural changes in terms of changing the departments, changing staff, new work plans, new everything. That has made our relationship with our local council nearly impossible*" (FPC3).

Local authority actors were identified as crucial members of the majority of food partnerships and, in many cases, utilised their accustomed role in facilitating multi-sector partnerships to coordinate actions

[9] There is a distinct socio-spatial pattern to austerity, with councils located in the north of England, in the most deprived areas, and/or controlled by the Labour Party experiencing significant reductions in spending power (SPERI, 2014: 3).

around two main priority areas: food poverty and public health. Significantly, the devolution of powers and funds from central to local government in relation to public health in England (beginning formally in 2013) heightened practitioners' interest in food partnerships as a way to tackle health inequalities locally:

> "*we are running the Sugar Smart campaign[10] and one of our staff here has half a day to coordinate it, but a lot of work has been picked up by public health […]. This person, she has got the bit between her teeth and loves this campaign*" (FPC7).

Austerity and public sector restructuring, limited financial resources and inconsistent staffing support were widely identified as crucial barriers to developing and implementing more ambitious and progressive food policy priorities:

> "*I'm in a situation where I'm surviving on ad hoc pieces of money that have been collected over the last 2 or 3 years but it means that I'm in delivery hell […] trying to manage 5 or 6 programmes while simultaneously supporting the network*" (FPC3).

However, some interviewees highlighted the potential of austerity to open up political and material spaces to enable a variety of CSOs to experiment with existing infrastructures and nurture capacities to reconfigure socio-ecological relations: "*I think austerity is also an opportunity as well, thinking about new ways of doing things*" (FPC5), where budget cuts have "… *produced some creative responses, so I think cities are figuring out how to make very smart use of their public resources*" (FPC13). While this is based on a pragmatic politics of working within the complexities of austerity and developing micro-resistances within the fissures of neoliberal urban governance, it also highlights the importance of problematizing

[10] Sugar Smart UK was the lead campaign of the SFCN in 2017-18. Led by Sustain, it supported a cross-sector approach to reduce the over-consumption of sugar by transforming local food environments and raising awareness about the impacts of consuming too much sugar (see: https://www.sugarsmartuk.org/).

'innovation' based on regressive austerity politics; fundamentally, there is a danger that this discourse 'normalizes' regressive spending cuts and welfare reform.

In this context, the *Beyond the Foodbank* (2014-15) campaign coordinated by the SFCN was crucial in demonstrating "*that poverty is the result of structural governmental decision-making*" (FPC3) and, subsequently, led to the development of the UK Food Poverty Alliance. For many food partnerships, this multi-scalar collective action campaign, which lobbied both local and national government to comprehend the *multidimensional* character of food poverty and challenge the problematic institutionalization of charity food responses to hunger, provided a basis to develop practical and policy interventions to address the structural causes of food insecurity. As a FPC describes:

> "*… so one of the things we're doing is trying to have more sophisticated conversations about food poverty amongst people, amongst the policymakers and the senior Council Officers, so it's not about food banks […], it's actually about recognizing that food banks are one tiny part of a crisis response and a much bigger, more integrated approach is needed in order to stop people repeatedly coming back into crisis and requiring emergency support*" (FPC6).

Significantly, several food partnership actors discussed the tension between balancing the urgency to address hunger – and, thus, provide support for initiatives such as urban agricultural projects and school breakfast clubs – and the importance of challenging the structural relations that create food system vulnerabilities. Both sustainable food procurement and food waste strategies were discussed as key areas to provide food partnerships with tangible ways to devise their own solutions to the global food crisis. In relation to the former, a FPC described:

> "*I set up the public procurement group and as part of that process I found out about a lot of good practice that I wasn't aware of, so it was actually quite a strength […] it's been key people which*

share the desire to move towards more sustainable food procurement […] and I think we have made progress" (FPC7).

In general, place-based urban food governance seems to imply an outward recognition of the complex and manifold socio-ecological processes that shape cities as socionatural assemblages. Indeed, stakeholders used various terms, such as: "*leaky borders […] those lines on the map really don't mean anything*" (FPC7), to denote the porous and interdependent nature of 'local' food (strategies). As a FPC explained, since "*food does not obey the boundary lines of the borough or a city*" (FPC4), re-localization involves building strategic alliances with adjacent cities, towns and rural areas. While in some cases this was discussed in terms of cross-boundary cooperation, other stakeholders highlighted longstanding regional rivalries between cities, increasingly competitive processes for reduced funding amongst CSOs and the personal agendas of particular key food partnership actors as factors that reduce the ability to forge alliances at different scales. Interviewees also stressed how the reconfiguration of urban-rural linkages is impeded by a notable lack of infrastructure (i.e., processing, manufacturing and, in some instances, adequate transport links) that would require significant sunk investment. As discussed by a FPC in relation to rural areas of Scotland:

"*because you've got this disconnection between rural and urban, actually most of the food made in the rural areas doesn't go directly into the cities, it goes into [….] the five chains […], a lot of rural areas don't actually have the infrastructure for processing […]. One of the big barriers in some places is not having the infrastructure to allow them to produce for the local market […]. And a lot of the rural regions in Scotland are really struggling, are in decline, so you've got very low-wage economies, who then can't afford to purchase the local food*" (FPC9).

In this respect, interviewees confirmed recent statements by the SFCN (Davies, 2018) regarding the role of food system infrastructure (such as processing facilities, wholesale markets and street trading) as a

potentially crucial local authority policy lever that, however, in the current climate of austerity, remains underutilized.

5.2 Geometries of Power, Political Imaginaries and Priorities in the Emerging Realm of Urban Food Governance

Achieving political support from key actors (such as mayors and local authority councillors) is crucial for new food governance configurations to gain legitimacy within the broader urban governance landscape: "*for partnerships to work, you need political and operational buy-in to working in that way […] to sort of develop the understanding of why partnerships are so important for systemic change*" (FPC12). Interviewees who participated in food partnerships that operated on a primarily informal basis emphasized how the absence of explicit political support limited their ability to devise ways to "*make change, rather than just tinkering around the edges*" (FPC6). For example, a newly emerging food partnership in Scotland had no explicit political support until a change in local government administration created opportunities to engage with a range of actors:

> "…*we have been working to raise the profile of our work and speak to the different candidates in their run up to the elections, and then to engage with the successful Councillors after the election, and offered somewhere to try and influence their Programme for Government […] that has resulted in becoming a Sustainable Food City being one of the commitments in the Council Plan for this term. So we have now got explicit political support for what we're trying to do, which kind of legitimizes our work*" (FPC6).

While some partnerships struggle to gain political support within existing urban institutions, others are intimately entwined with formal politics and receive 'high-level' endorsement. This is most vividly

demonstrated by the development of the London Food Board[11] and, subsequently, the London Food Strategy (LFS), which established food as a key policy agenda for the city:

> "*I think the fact that Ken[12], you know, initially back in 2006, committed really a very large sum of money to produce a big Food Strategy […] it's pretty ambitious, and he was prepared to commit a lot of really quite big sums of money to many of the things that are in that Strategy. So, I think we got off to a good start and it was encouraged […]. I mean you want massive leadership behind it all the way through*" (FPC8).

The fact that various mayoral administrations have supported the LFS demonstrates the diverse ways in which food can align with multiple political agendas, ranging from the 'greening' of the 2012 Olympic Games spearheaded by the Capital Growth Scheme under (Conservative Mayor) Boris Johnson to (Labour Mayor) Sadiq Khan and the emphasis on a renewed strategy. Indeed, within the LFS's draft for consultation (GLA, 2018), food is placed within a broader international 'movement' of cities and mayors strategically leading food system change through 'innovative' governance mechanisms (in the case of London, by embedding it across the full range of Mayoral strategies and policies).

For interviewees, navigating existing urban institutional frameworks involved being sensitive to the performative power between an array of actors, institutions and practices because "*if you don't understand how the politics is working with your space, it is very difficult to influence*" (FPC5). Dealing with the existing power dynamics of urban elites (such as mayors and local councillors) reinforces the complexity of simultaneously working within (and challenging) established networks of power while

[11] The London Food Board comprises of 19 individuals who advise the Mayor of London and the Greater London Authority on matters related to food. The London Food Board and the Greater London Authority also manage a food partnership as a member of the SFCN.
[12] Ken Livingstone was Mayor of London when the LFS was launched (in 2006).

aiming to institutionalize the demands of local actors for more inclusive and transparent decision-making processes with regard to influencing, shaping and extending food policy.

5.3 Cultivating Interpersonal Relations: Food Champions and Policy Entrepreneurs

Stakeholders emphasized the importance of food champions in driving the agenda of food partnerships and developing conducive interpersonal relations, based on "*relationship building and networking*" (FPC7), which enable them to identify supportive actors across a complex and fragmented governance landscape. This was articulated by FPCs as being essential for embedding their work within existing urban institutions, processes and structures but also for creating new spaces for collaboration beyond existing projects, which frequently entails nurturing relationships with key socially embedded actors – 'food policy entrepreneurs' – who have a personal interest in food and find creative ways to participate in food partnerships, frequently beyond their (formal) job description. As a FPC explained:

> "*it's down to personalities, I just can't get away from this, it's always the same, it's actually down to particular people, a light goes on, something happens and they realize they love this sort of thing, they really want to do it, so they just work, they'll work it into their job somehow*" (FPC7).

The emphasis placed on the importance of identifying and enrolling individual 'food champions' within local authorities helps to challenge any simple demarcation of the local 'state' but also raises important questions regarding reinforcing existing privilege, whereby key actors cultivate personal connections with established 'urban elites'. Given the emphasis food partnerships place on creating inclusive spaces for collective action, there is frequently a failure to recognize the differential, uneven and, therefore, privileged positions that some stakeholders occupy over others. Beyond the specific food partnerships, highly motivated elite 'food champions' affiliated with national NGOs were identified as crucial conduits not only for knowledge sharing, exchange and advice, but also as networked champions who have sought

to nurture and propagate the SFCN model via a range of strategic alliances, practices and platforms (such as conferences, websites, webinars and social media). This raises questions about whose voice and vision are incapsulated in the notion of a 'sustainable food city'.

5.4 Cultivating an Uneven Playing Field: The Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion

The process of assembling and enrolling actors into co-governance configurations is for some food partnerships a complicated process in terms of inclusivity, representation and accountability. In particular, many partnerships are actively struggling over the inclusion of private sector interests, as a FPC explained:

> "*… A lot of them [food partnerships] are finding they're having difficulties getting the private sector involved, because they're like, 'who should be involved?', 'who won't come along and kind of make it more about them making profit?'*" (FPC9).

This is saliently highlighted by a food partnership that is experiencing difficulty in deciding how best to incorporate private businesses:

> "*… we have not got any private sector involvement […], we've really struggled with that actually […] because we're discussing things like sustainable food procurement and trying to identify how we can refresh our procurement contracts in the public sector and by having private sector at the table, you either are, or could be seen to be, giving them competitive advantage […]. And, in the end, to keep ourselves dry, we haven't got any membership from the private sector yet*" (FPC6).

The concern surrounding the private and economic capture, co-option and exploitation of the work of food partnerships reflects the prioritisation some placed on actively developing an uneven playing field, which is orientated in favour of private food actors who demonstrate a clear commitment to sustainability principles -- in a broader context of power imbalances embedded in the globalized industrial food system.

For example, one food partnership placed particular importance on developing connections with, and 'steering' consumers to, private businesses that supported their vision by devising a membership card that partners can use to obtain a discount:

> "*We have got about 150 businesses that we work with in a variety of different ways signed up to the partnership […] so we are encouraging people to use those businesses that we know are doing something really positive around sustainable sourcing, it's just an incentive to get people through the door and into the right places to see those places prosper*" (FPC11).

FPCs from the voluntary sector described how they sought to create opportunities to collaborate with local government or businesses on their own terms[13]. However, several food partnerships highlighted the difficulty of maintaining momentum, with some struggling to retain membership and stalling when key individuals changed employment or lost funding for their post:

> "*The turnover's big, particularly in the third sector, the nature of the way they're funded means lots and lots of short-term contracts […] in terms of those people that are involved; their capacity is limited because often this is not quite part of their job, it's over and above their job […]. Whilst it may be important to the individuals and something they believe in, they often find it's difficult to prioritize over other demands […]. There's been an issue of sustained membership*" (FPC6).

Indeed, the messy, everyday complexity of sustaining food partnerships, particularly in the absence of a dedicated project officer, creates a situation where roles and responsibilities – and, therefore, expectations from partners -- are unclear and continually negotiated, leading to a tendency to work towards consensus politics, rather than embedding notions of dissent and antagonism into these spaces:

[13] Multi-actor food partnerships can be understood as part of Gibson-Graham's vision of an alternative community economy that allows for a "politics of possibility" based on refusing "to see co-optation as a necessary condition of consorting with power" (2006: xxvi).

"*It's everybody's doing this almost on a voluntary basis […]. It's difficult to criticize people that are taking on that responsibility more or less over and above their main job […]. Everybody kind of knows one another and there's not that there aren't tensions there, but equally I think people would try and avoid it*" (FPC10).

Some stakeholders discussed how food partnerships are relatively self-selective in terms of membership (i.e., incorporating those who already have an active interest in, or their employment aligned with, food-related issues) and, therefore, implicitly excluded more 'radical' voices or those who actually experience food insecurity[14]. Furthermore, while the informality of some food partnerships was articulated as a positive characteristic that enables flexibility, the focus on consensus-building implies that the existing structural power relations at both the local and national level remain unchallenged.

5.5 Cultivating an Uneven Geography through Urban Food Governance Experiments?

The implementation of food policy at the 'local' level is contextualised by finer-grained differences in priorities and resources, which create an uneven coverage and, therefore, can perpetuate patterns of inequality between and within places. This multi-scalar process is permeated by a spatial imaginary that positions some cities located in southern England (such as London, Bristol and Brighton and Hove) as innovative and crucial to shaping the broader sustainable food cities agenda, and others as marginal. One example is the incommensurability of the SFCN award structure and the place-based context of food partnerships that have a predominantly rural constituency or are located in Northern England:

[14] The Food Power Programme, a 3-year initiative launched in 2017 and coordinated by the NGOs Sustain and Church Action on Poverty, is a legacy of the *Beyond the Foodbank* campaign, and is particularly important as an example of empowering those with lived experience of food insecurity to find solutions to the problem through local alliances, collective learning and sharing good practice (see: https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower/about/).

"*… we have got our strategy and our priorities […], but we can't be dictated to from an organization that is based in London […]. That sounded a bit partisan, but you know what I mean […] so the point about context matters. And we might not be doing more than Bristol was doing 10 years ago but we are doing a hell of a lot more than was happening before this was launched*" (FPC7).

This narrative draws attention to the importance of spatial justice at multiple scales and geographies when framing the work of food partnerships. Indeed, it highlights the material and symbolic effects of spatial imaginaries entangled with the complex regional geographies of the UK that are contextualized by uneven development, investment and political power. Furthermore, due to the arbitrary spatial limits of local governance that align with administrative boundaries and local authority powers, an uneven patchwork of policy implementation can develop within the same city. For example, the relatively mainstreamed nature of London's food policy is juxtaposed by the complexity of the city's local governance structure, consisting of 32 boroughs and the City of London. Since the borough councils operate across Greater London and are responsible for running most local services in their areas, there is significant variation in food policy priorities and implementation, as demonstrated by the enactment of the free school meals programme described by a FPC:

"*…having seen the mandatory free school meals programme go in, you get, there is a difference between how the Councils have chosen to operate that policy. I mean some have really, really embraced it and taken not just the idea that we will serve out the free school meal every day to the first three years, but also we will really push to implement all the standards that went alongside the free school meals [...] and so, even within something mandatory, there is local interpretation*" (FPC8).

This 'local interpretation' draws attention to the challenges of ensuring that place-specific needs are met and that urban inequalities are not widened by differential priorities and flows of resources and capital:

"*…when you're in non-mandatory, you're really, really dependent on local interpretation […]. I mean, one of the boroughs up north has just, they banned, they started to work really hard with fast food restaurants that are near schools, to try to get them to put healthy options in. This is not true everywhere, and that would be something that a Council again would say 'actually […] we see healthy kids as one of our priorities, one of the ways we're going to spend what money we have, or if not money, we're going to put our human resources in that direction'. So, it's incredibly not standard*" (FPC8).

This is further supported by the *Good Food for London* (Sustain, 2017) report, which demonstrates that progress towards improving food culture in schools is variable across Greater London – both between and within boroughs. For example, in 2017, 22 boroughs had 'some or a moderate proportion' of schools engaged in the Healthy Schools London[15] and/or the Food for Life[16] initatives, while only seven boroughs had a majority of schools engaged in the programmes.

Differential political support, diverse local policy landscapes and marginalised and disadvantaged communities and regions with fewer material resources and capacity are all factors that can create an uneven governance landscape. As highlighted by interviewees, without support from 'vertical' holistic policies (such as a national food policy) and comprehensive government intervention in the form of legislative action in tackling the root causes of poverty (for example, by implementing an universal living wage), food partnerships may be constrained in terms of achieving their objectives.

[15] A Mayor of London's award scheme that recognises schools' efforts to adopt a whole-school approach to health and wellbeing. Examples of work include growing fruit and vegetables, healthy packed lunches, improved cooking skills, healthy snacks and regular water drinking (see: http://www.healthyschools.london.gov.uk/about).
[16] A project of the Soil Association that focuses on institutions such as schools to achieve the vision of making good food the easy choice for everyone (see: https://www.foodforlife.org.uk/about-us).

6. Re-Scaling the Politics of Food Governance: An Analysis

Our research shows that the everyday micro-politics and the broader political-economic context can constrain and frustrate action and, ultimately, encumber or even stifle the development of more progressive social change. This frequently entailed FPCs pragmatically navigating the situated social hierarchies, local political cultures and vested interests at the political-administration level to obtain support for the newly emerging governance mechanisms. Indeed, the politics through which incremental changes are achieved are often reliant on developing and nurturing interpersonal relationships between what we have characterised as 'food policy entrepreneurs' and local political actors. The intricate mix of personalities and institutions that shape urban food governance configurations can lead to micro-political contestations based on vested interests and, therefore, stymie more radical transformations of political structures. This socio-political complexity helps to challenge the problematic tendency to assume the local scale is inherently more democratic than others (Purcell, 2006). Furthermore, the fact that the majority of food partnerships consist of steering groups that are comprised of key representatives from local authority departments and CSOs problematizes the notion of inclusivity (and expanded participation) and draws attention to the possibility of reinforcing, or creating, new urban elites. Indeed, the internal contestations in some food partnerships regarding the inclusion of (particular) private sector interests highlights the unresolved concerns over co-option, cooperation and political collaboration that can limit the participation of diverse and oppositional voices.

As we have shown, food partnerships have politicized food in two main ways. First, they emphasize the political dimensions of the production, distribution and (post-)consumption of food, criticizing the vast inequalities embedded in the global industrial food system. This creates the basis for the development of place-based strategies that attempt to reconfigure socio-ecological relations by creating projects related to health, sustainability and food poverty. At present, the immediate need to address hunger somewhat overshadows more strategic objectives, highlighting the trade-offs that are negotiated when framing the

everyday mundane work of local food policy. Indeed, reconfiguring rural-urban linkages and broader structural processes is currently impeded by a notable lack of infrastructure and investment along with regressive political processes, which hinder partnerships and their ability to engender more radical socio-ecological alternatives. Limited and precarious funding, austerity and the enthusiasm with which some local authorities have embraced food partnerships draw attention to the blurred line between cooperation and co-option, whereby these 'governance-beyond-the-state' configurations (Swyngedouw, 2005) are vulnerable to appropriation by neoliberal agendas (e.g., the privatisation of responsibility for structural inequalities).

Second, food partnerships have developed a nuanced critique of the interconnections between welfare reform, poverty and hunger by relating these processes to broader structural critiques of the neoliberal state, austerity politics and charity-based approaches to food poverty. However, the fact that, as elucidated by some stakeholders, food partnerships are failing to resonate with (or include) those who are most vulnerable to food insecurity downplays the role of food partnerships as political spaces of deliberation, since it leads to the exclusion of voices based on diverse lived experiences and knowledges. Furthermore, food partnerships based around consensual governing and policymaking have de-politicizing mechanisms in place, as highlighted by some stakeholders who described how disagreement is limited for fear of creating conflicts and tensions within fragile assemblages. This is nuanced by interviewees articulating the importance of being reflexive in terms of recognizing those who challenge the post-political endorsement of consensus governance by pluralising partners and engaging in broader advocacy work to influence or contest (neoliberal) national policy.

In sum, our findings highlight that a complex geography of food insecurity has contextualised an uneven geography of innovative food governance configurations in which the interpersonal relationships embedded in local politics are particularly important in shaping an urban food agenda in particular places. In the UK at least, the recent diffusion of novel governance mechanisms is based on harnessing the

discursive power and spatial imaginary of urban areas as experimental spaces to rescale food politics -- highlighting the political power of the geographical imagination inscribed by the circulation of ideas facilitated by urban elites and food policy entrepreneurs.

Crucially, the very nature of food systems – as interconnected, multi-scalar and convoluted entanglement of relations – challenges attempts to 'fix' its unsustainability and ascertain governable urban space for politically focused actions for systemic change. Interviewees identified particular cities as beacons of innovative food policy developments whereby place-based forms of decision-making are beginning to reshape the food policy landscape (e.g., Bristol). At the same time, some stakeholders highlighted an interesting tension between who decides what a sustainable food city is in addition to what this designation means in a broader context of uneven development and powerful spatial imaginaries (such as north-south, local-global and between the devolved nations and the UK). Clearly, new forms of urban governance cannot be disentangled from broader neoliberal processes by which cities need to remain nationally and globally competitive – a trend that can potentially transform the designation of 'sustainable food city' into yet another signifier of inter-urban competition.

7. Re-Politicizing and Re-Scaling Food: Some Conclusions

An UPE perspective has enabled a critical appraisal of new spaces of food policy engagement, questioning whether they help in shifting the power relations that create inequalities and impede politically transformative possibilities. Bringing together insights from UPE and place-based approaches to food policy, our analysis highlights the ways in which new governance configurations are shaped by distinctive historical-geographic contexts and multi-scalar socio-ecological relations. A situated UPE perspective facilitates (horizontal) comparison between place-based approaches *and* a (more vertical) multi-scalar perspective on whether such approaches are cohesive enough to engender transformations at higher

(interconnected) scales. Questioning the transformative potential of these new spaces of possibility and the risks of co-option to neoliberal processes (such as state retrenchment and the transferral of responsibility for deeply structural problems onto cross-sector food coalitions) helps to counteract the general celebratory discussion in early scholarship.

Indeed, while academic attention has highlighted the predominantly positive aspects of an 'alternative food geography' emerging as a result of cities becoming food policy actors (Wiskerke, 2009; Morgan, 2015a), this article raises the need for a *critical geography* of place-based food governance to uncover the social and spatial inequalities that impede the tripartite dimensions of sustainability to be systematically achieved through governance processes. The politics of rescaling food insecurity uncovers the contingent and relational character of place-based food governance actions, processes and outcomes, which are constrained by an interconnected knot of contextualised relations that generate an uneven unfolding of resources and power, constraining the ability of food partnerships to reconfigure underlying structural power geometries.

Crucially, while we have argued for a critical examination of such relations, this does not imply the simple reproduction of a certain style of (abstract) critique that has become increasingly habitual within urban studies (see Perry and Atherton, 2017). Quite the contrary, our approach draws empirical attention to food governance configurations as complex, ambiguous spaces of possibility that emanate from new modes of relating and capacity-building through place-based food partnerships, while remaining sensitive to the nuanced production of differential relational flows of power that contribute to the (re-)production of inequality. Such an approach enables potential cracks of change to be identified and prised apart – against, within and beyond existing institutional structures (Holloway, 2002), while also remaining cognisant to the entrenched structural obstacles that impede food partnerships from reworking urban metabolism and addressing broader social, economic and environmental inequalities. Specifically, focusing on the micro-politics of everyday governance processes emphasizes the importance of power

and spatial justice, orientating attention towards pragmatic and reformist routes to engender social change (Lawhon et al., 2014), and highlights the significance of bringing together a range of individuals, groups and organizations that encompass a desire to move towards more sustainable food systems.

While in their infancy, food partnerships hold the potential to become harbingers of a new shift in food policy that nurtures interpersonal connections between diverse actors and organizations and re-politicize food activity to devise multi-scalar place-based strategies. However, as our findings suggest, food partnerships operate in a politically unstable and complex institutional landscape. Hence, they endeavour to work towards incremental policy changes by building legitimacy and cultivating constructive interpersonal relationships with key governance stakeholders and identifying pathways to stimulate social change through pragmatic food practices and (reformist) advocacy work. While this stance is more likely to appeal to policymakers, it also increases the risk of de-politicization, co-option and possible manipulation of the situated, everyday workings of place-based governance efforts seeking to enact a more emancipatory food politics. Clearly, the emerging urban agenda is raising the need for greater comparative research that gives analytical prominence to power dynamics and broader (but always situated and ambiguous) governance processes -- in the food system and beyond.

Acknowledgments

Research for this paper has been funded from the EU's 7th Framework Programme, theme KBBE.2013.2.5-01 (grant agreement no: 613532). The authors would like to thank Dr Ana Moragues-Faus for her contribution to data collection. We would also like to thank the editor and two anonymous reviewers for their useful and constructive comments.

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