

The Milan Food Policy: Six lessons for local food strategies

Dr David Monciardini, University of Exeter Business School
Ottavia Pieretto (MSc), University of Exeter
Dr Tiago de Melo Cartaxo, University of Exeter Law School

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“None of us alone can make the city food system work. It only works if we collaborate.” Fondazione Cariplo (1)

Executive Summary

Milan is acknowledged worldwide for its significant commitment to developing a more inclusive and sustainable urban food policy. In 2021, the Italian city won the prestigious Earthshot Prize in the category ‘build a waste-free world’ for being “the first major city to enforce a city-wide food waste policy encompassing public agencies, food banks, charities, NGOs, universities, and private businesses” (2). Milan established its Food Policy in 2015, creating a dedicated Milan Food Policy Office that has been pivotal during the Covid-19 emergency and beyond to reduce food waste and ensure access to healthier diets to hundreds of vulnerable households. Through a mix of interviews and archival data, this research outlines six useful lessons for public authorities in the UK.

Context

The UK is currently experiencing a food crisis. Approximately 3 million people within the UK are malnourished, costing the NHS over £19 billion per year (3). Food insecurity is not a new problem, but one that has been exacerbated by the pandemic and is now being heightened by the severe cost of living crisis. Food insecurity levels remain higher than pre-Covid levels and it is likely to accelerate, given the global and geopolitical situation. One in five households already faces a ‘heat or eat’ dilemma (4). Almost 10% of all households are said to experience food insecurity (5), while 2 million tonnes of good-to-eat food is wasted in the UK every year, the equivalent of 1.3 billion meals (6). And here we have not even listed the manifold

nutritional and health challenges (including obesity, diabetes, etc) and environmental impacts of the food system (e.g. if food was a country, it would record the highest carbon emissions in the world) (7).

In response to this deep food crisis, experts have called for comprehensive local and national food policies (8). A food policy is an institutional initiative to act, with a vision and a systemic approach, on the components of the food system of a city or region: production, processing, logistics, distribution, consumption, and waste. As many cities and regions are looking at adopting a food policy, they face several challenges. In a political sense, long-term, preventive and preparatory policies are often difficult to pursue, because they do not gain votes. Moreover, ambitious and overarching food policies are impractical because they are so complex that face problems with scale and scope (9). Tensions might arise when policymakers try to bring together completely different issues – e.g. health and safety, international supply chains, farming, education – and stakeholders representing different interests. We need to better understand how and why some public authorities succeed to design effective food policies.

Research Aims

There are many cases of successful local food strategies, including in the UK (10). Our research examines the Milan Food Policy (MFP), widely seen as a successful case of food policy design and implementation (11). This qualitative research was carried out between February and May 2022. First, we performed a desk-based investigation. This was followed by field research and 16 in-depth semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from different sectors of the Milan food system.

Research Findings

In 2015, Milan hosted the world EXPO “Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life”. This event has been a window of opportunity for the launch of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP), an international agreement focusing on local food systems, signed today by more

than 200 cities globally (12). Consequently, the Municipality of Milan established its own food policy (13). Following a participatory process and detailed assessment of the Milan food system (14), five priorities were identified (15). The MFP reached greater international recognition during the Covid-19 crisis due to the creation of neighbourhood food hubs that provided highly nutritious food to over 6,000 households in need, recovering and redistributing hundreds of tons of food (16). Beyond the food hubs, Milan has been able to build a very effective and comprehensive food policy (11). Focusing on strategic governance aspects, we identified six relevant policy lessons that explain Milan's success story.

1. Partner with 'anchor institutions'

In 2015, when the MFP Office was established, *"there was nothing"* (17). The strategic partnership with some 'anchor institutions' has been crucial to building trust and credibility. Anchor institutions are typically large organisations that are unlikely to relocate and have a significant stake in their local area (18). At its heart, the MFP is a pact between the Municipality and a well-established 'anchor institution', Fondazione Cariplo. This is a philanthropic charitable foundation established in 1991 to promote the social, cultural and economic development of the Lombardy community. Beyond the provision of important financial and scientific support, this partnership allowed the food policy to build on an established network of business and third-sector organisations. Over time, the Food Office established partnerships with other 'anchor organisations', such as Assolombarda, the local business association, and Polytechnic University of Milan (19).

2. TLT governance structure

The MFP is coordinated by a tight *"control room"* (1, 17) made of a small number of key decision-makers: two from the Municipality and two from Fondazione Cariplo. This orchestrates cross-sector collaborative efforts across a loose network of municipal offices and enterprises; third sector; and for-profit organisations.

There is a rigorous and independent technical and scientific assessment of the MFP's results by third-party organisations. For instance, the Polytechnic University of Milan has been tasked to develop and monitor the food hubs (15, 19). In management and leadership studies this approach is known as 'Tight-Loose-Tight' or TLT governance framework (20). Tight executive team; loose networked implementation, allowing great autonomy; tight definition and measurement of results. This agile governance structure enabled the city to be more resilient to crises and transformations, facilitating negotiations and deliberations, and fostering a greater understanding of the food system's needs and opportunities.

3. The 'culture of data'

At the heart of the tight executive group that oversees the MFP, there is a common denominator: *"we all have this culture of data"* (17). All the key decision-makers have strong research and scientific background and training. This culture of data has been fundamental in all the phases of the MFP, from territorial planning to monitoring and assessing the results. It also allowed the MFP to take an evidence-based and pragmatic approach to the enormous task of designing and implementing a food policy.

4. Pass the ball! A playmaker, not a striker

One of the most surprising findings of our study has been that the lack of power of the MFP office has triggered collaboration. According to Andrea Magarini *"we didn't have the power to sign anything and thus we necessarily had to find consensus."* (17) All our interviews highlight that the MFP deliberately took a step back, enabling cross-sectoral synergies to emerge on a project basis. This is essential because food policies require a transversal approach that cuts across a variety of areas of competence (9).

5. Food strategies require a long-time horizon

One element that clearly emerges from our data is the awareness that, because of its scale and scope, an effective food policy requires a long-time horizon. We found that critical preparatory work has been done by

the ESTà Research Centre, way before 2015. Then, the actual establishment of the MFP took another two years. Thus, what was proposed is “a pact of 5 years” (21). This long-time horizon paid off years later and particularly when the Covid-19 crisis erupted.

6. *Learn global and act local*

Our findings suggest that the MFP has always been learning from experiences across the globe and acting based on a thorough understanding of local problems. The 2014 preparatory work by ESTà has been certainly influenced by international experiences as well as by the accurate mapping of the capacities and needs of the Milan food system (14). Also, there is a wealth of information about best practices that Milan receives by leading the MUFPP international agreement among 225 cities (12). The international vocation of the MFP is also illustrated by its leading role in the Working Group Food of Eurocities, the network of 51 European cities active in food policy development, and in C40 Food System Network, the international network of cities engaged in the fight against climate change (22). This international activism was crucial during the Covid-19 crisis, when the MFP office coordinated with other city officers, such as Toronto, Barcelona and Seoul, to foster policy learning and cooperation and gather knowledge, which helped them tackle the crisis effectively (23).

Policy implications and proposal

The activity of an effective Food Policy Office can be summarised in six points:

- Build on the leverage of ‘anchor institutions’;
- Act transversely across municipal departments;
- Orchestrate cross-sector collaborative efforts across a loose network of public and private organisations;
- Map the local food system and monitor results;
- Foster longer-term actions, projects, and initiatives to realise the strategic objective of the local food policy;
- Foster cooperation and best practices exchange across local authorities nationally and internationally.

Therefore, we encourage the UK Government to officially acknowledge the importance of supporting local food policies, for instance by setting up a national funding scheme to support local food strategies. We suggest that all major UK local authorities could and should have a dedicated Food Policy Office, like the one active in Milan. This is currently rare in the UK and globally. However, the example of Milan shows that a local food policy can be developed and effectively delivered helping to reduce inequality, cost of living and food waste.

References

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22) Over time, this international network also helped the MFP to successfully build a number of international projects. For example, in 2019 the Municipality of Milan was awarded the EU project *Food Wave - Empowering Urban Youth for Climate Action* to engage young people on climate and food issues with a consortium of 28 partners (<https://www.foodwave.eu/>). Another prominent example is *Food Trails*, a partnership of 11 cities, aimed at developing transformative local food policies best practices (<https://foodtrails.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org/>).

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Contact details

Dr. David Monciardini

Senior Lecturer

University of Exeter Business School

Penryn G11, SERSF building Cornwall TR10 9EZ

Tel: +44 (0) 1326259172

Mobile: +44 07 508620045

Email: d.monciardini@exeter.ac.uk