

OPINION / GÖRÜŞ

A Critical Perspective on Multilevel Governance and Policy Integration: Thematic Partnership on Food from the Urban Agenda for the EU

AB Şehir Gündemi'nden Gıda için Tematik Ortaklık: Çok Düzeyli Yönetişim ve Politika Entegrasyonuna Eleştirel Bir Bakış

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Introduction

The need for coherent and integrative food policies across multiple governance levels in the European Union (EU) has become increasingly apparent. Despite decades of substantial reports and research from established specialists like IPES-Food, which highlighted systemic gaps and proposed comprehensive frameworks for food policy, there remains significant fragmentation and inefficiency in food governance. This article critically assesses the role of multilevel governance in food system resilience and the necessity for integrative policies that enable coordinated actions across various levels of government. We argue that the Thematic Partnership on Food, developed under the Urban Agenda for the EU, represents a crucial step towards addressing these challenges.

Critical Assessment of Multilevel Governance in the EU

Multilevel governance in the EU is characterised by its complexity and often incoherent policies, which hinder effective

action on food system sustainability. The current governance structure involves numerous overlapping policies and regulations at the EU, national, and local levels, leading to misaligned objectives and reduced effectiveness. The IPES-Food 2019 report, "Toward a Common Food Policy," emphasized the urgency of creating a cohesive food policy framework that integrates various aspects of the food system, from production to consumption and waste management.

The Need for Integrated Food Policies

Integrated food policies are essential for enabling coordinated multilevel action. Such policies should encompass the entire food system, addressing production, distribution, consumption, and waste. They should also consider the environmental, social, and economic impacts of food production and consumption. By internalizing externalities and promoting sustainable practices, integrated food policies can ensure that market prices reflect the true cost of food production, including its environmental and social impacts.

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Thematic Partnership on Food: A Response to Governance Challenges

The European Commission, through DG REGIO and the European Urban Initiative, launched the Thematic Partnership on Food as part of the Urban Agenda for the EU. This initiative, based on the ex-ante assessment conducted in 2023, aims to bridge the gaps identified in existing food governance structures. Despite the short period for the assessment, the wealth of documentation and previous research provided a solid foundation for identifying key areas of focus.

Short Assessment Period vs. Decades of Research

The ex-ante assessment period was notably brief. However, the substantial body of work from the past two decades, including critical reports from IPES-Food, provided invaluable insights. These documents highlighted the systemic issues within the EU food system and offered comprehensive recommendations for policy reform. The partnership draws on this extensive research to inform its strategies and actions.

Key Areas of Focus for the Thematic Partnership

The Thematic Partnership on Food focuses on several critical areas to enhance food system resilience and sustainability through improved governance:

1. Fragmented Policy Framework: Addressing the fragmentation in current food policies is paramount. The partnership advocates for an overarching policy framework that integrates various aspects of the food system, ensuring coherence and alignment across different policy areas.

2. Inclusion of Externalities: Implementing policies that internalize externalities in food pricing is crucial. By accounting for the true environmental and social costs of food production, these policies can promote more sustainable practices.

3. Food Justice and Access to Land: Integrating food justice into EU policies ensures equitable access to nutritious food for all populations. Additionally, improving access to land for sustainable food production is vital for supporting young and small-scale farmers.

4. Reducing Dependence on Global Supply Chains: Promoting decentralized and diversified local food systems can reduce the EU's reliance on global supply chains, enhancing food security and resilience to disruptions.

5. Enhancing Multi-Level Governance: Strengthening coordination and coherence between EU, national, and local policies through multi-level governance frameworks is essential. This involves establishing local food policy councils and city-region food systems that facilitate integrated and participatory approaches to food system transformation.

6. Supporting Effective Funding: Creating innovation funds for local food systems by collaborating with banks interested in green financing and NGOs can address funding gaps and support sustainable initiatives.

Participatory Approaches and Bottom-up Initiatives

Participatory approaches and the involvement of bottom-up initiatives are critical for the success of integrated food policies. Engaging local communities, farmers, and other stakeholders in the policymaking process ensures that policies are grounded in practical realities and address the needs of those directly affected by them.

Urban Food Commissions and Food Policy Councils

Urban Food Commissions and Food Policy Councils represent innovative mechanisms for participatory governance. These bodies bring together diverse stakeholders to collaborate on developing and implementing food policies. They provide a platform for integrating local knowledge and expertise into policy decisions, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment among community members.

Case Studies and Best Practices

The partnership leverages case studies and best practices from cities known for their progressive food policies. Cities like Milan, Lisbon, Mouans-Sartoux, Vitoria-Gasteiz, and Ghent offer valuable insights into successful governance models and policy interventions.

Milan Urban Food Policy Pact

The Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP) exemplifies a comprehensive approach to urban food governance. It focuses on enhancing food security, promoting sustainable diets, and reducing food waste. The pact's emphasis on multi-stakeholder collaboration and policy coherence aligns with the objectives of the Thematic Partnership on Food.

Lisbon's Food Strategy

Lisbon's food strategy integrates various aspects of the food system, from urban agriculture to sustainable food procurement. The city's approach highlights the importance of localizing food systems and supporting small-scale producers. Lisbon's experience underscores the potential of city-led initiatives to drive systemic change.

Strategic Directions and Priorities

To address the identified governance challenges, the Thematic Partnership on Food has outlined several strategic directions and priorities:

1. Developing an Overarching Policy Framework: This framework should integrate various aspects of the food system, ensuring coherence and alignment across different policy areas.

2. Internalizing Externalities in Food Pricing: Policies should be implemented to internalize externalities, making sustainable practices more economically viable.

3. Promoting Food Justice and Improving Access to Land: EU policies should integrate food justice principles, ensuring equitable access to nutritious food and improving access to land for sustainable food production.

4. Reducing Dependence on Global Supply Chains: Promoting decentralized and diversified local food systems can reduce reliance on global supply chains, enhancing food security and resilience.

5. Enhancing Multi-Level Governance: Strengthening coordination and coherence between EU, national, and local policies through multi-level governance frameworks is essential.

6. Supporting Effective Funding: Creating innovation funds for local food systems by collaborating with banks interested in green financing and NGOs can address funding gaps and support sustainable initiatives.

Conclusion

The Thematic Partnership on Food under the Urban Agenda for the EU represents a critical step towards addressing the systemic governance challenges that hinder food system resilience and sustainability. By focusing on integrated food policies, participatory approaches, and multi-level governance, the partnership aims to create a coherent and effective framework for food system transformation. Drawing on decades of research and leveraging best practices from progressive cities, the partnership is well-positioned to drive meaningful change in the EU food system.

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