

ARTICLE / ARAŞTIRMA

“Hidden” Urban Food Strategies: Working “Behind the Scenes” of the International Food Networks from the Global South

“Gizli” Kentsel Gıda Stratejileri: Küresel Güney’den Uluslararası Gıda Ajandasının “Sahne Arkasında” Çalışmak

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ABSTRACT

Urban food strategies have gained significant attention in recent years, particularly those rooted in the Global North and embedded within international networks like the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact. However, this focus has created a research gap in understanding urban food strategies in the Global South, especially in Latin America. Additionally, there is limited exploration of “hidden” urban food strategies that operate outside these international frameworks. This paper investigates such a strategy in Gualeguaychú, an intermediate city in Argentina, which is developing an urban food policy independent of international agreements. Emphasising food sovereignty and alternative food networks, Gualeguaychú’s approach offers a unique case to explore how local urban food policies function, the challenges they encounter, and their alignment—or lack thereof—with global food policy frameworks. Through a qualitative-exploratory analysis, this study reviews institutional documents using a public policy analysis framework and examines the city’s predominant food supply system alongside its alternative food networks. The findings reveal Gualeguaychú’s efforts to reduce dependence on imported food by expanding short food supply chains and implementing redistributive land reforms, aiming to strengthen its local food system. This paper highlights the po-

ÖZ

Kentsel gıda stratejileri son yıllarda, özellikle Küresel Kuzey’de kök salmış ve Milan Kentsel Gıda Politikası Paketi gibi uluslararası ağlarla entegre olan stratejiler büyük ilgi görmüştür. Ancak, bu yoğun ilgi, Latin Amerika gibi Küresel Güney’deki kentsel gıda stratejilerinin anlaşılmasında belirgin bir araştırma boşluğu yaratmıştır. Ayrıca, bu uluslararası çerçevelerin dışında işleyen “gizli” kentsel gıda stratejileri üzerine yapılan araştırmalar oldukça sınırlıdır. Bu makale, Arjantin’in ara şehirlerinden biri olan Gualeguaychú’da, uluslararası anlaşmalardan bağımsız olarak geliştirilen bir kentsel gıda politikasını incelemektedir. Gualeguaychú’nun yaklaşımı, gıda egemenliği ve alternatif gıda ağlarına vurgu yaparak, yerel kentsel gıda politikalarının nasıl işlediğini, bu politikaların karşılaştığı zorlukları ve küresel gıda politikası çerçeveleriyle ne ölçüde uyumlu olup olmadığını keşfetmek için benzersiz bir vaka sunmaktadır. Niteliksel ve keşifsel bir analiz çerçevesinde, bu çalışma kamu politikası analiz çerçevesini kullanarak kurumsal belgeleri incelemekte ve şehrin baskın gıda tedarik sistemi ile alternatif gıda ağlarını değerlendirmektedir. Araştırmanın bulguları, Gualeguaychú’nun ithal gıdaya bağımlılığı azaltma, kısa gıda tedarik zincirlerini genişletme ve toprak reformlarını uygulama çabalarını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu makale, kentsel gıda politikalarının uluslararası çerçevelerin dışında da gelişme potansiyelini

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tential for urban food policies to evolve outside international frameworks, offering new perspectives from the Global South. Gualaguaychú's experience underscores the importance of local context in shaping urban food strategies and contributes to the broader discourse on food policy innovation.

Keywords: Agroecology; alternative food networks; intermediate cities; local food systems.

vurgulamakta ve Küresel Güney'den yeni perspektifler sunmaktadır. Gualaguaychú'nun deneyimi, kentsel gıda stratejilerinin şekillenmesinde yerel bağlamın ne kadar önemli olduğunu ortaya koymakta ve gıda politikası yeniliği üzerine genişleyen küresel tartışmalara önemli bir katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Agroekoloji; alternatif gıda ağı; ara şehirler; yerel gıda sistemi.

I. Introduction

The approach to the fundamental importance of food as a universal right and a biologically, socially and culturally necessary element is articulated with the rise of a new food equation that responds to *“the growing concerns about the security and sustainability of the agri-food system”* (Morgan & Sonnino, 2010). Social movements, and some strands of academia and political parties have been pushing this “food agenda” as a priority problem for urban policies in terms of urban food planning. This operational and conceptual approach, which is being increasingly institutionalised, operates within the frame of Food Security, the human right to adequate food and, most notably in some parts of the Global South, with a Food Sovereignty approach which, unlike the previous ones, emphasizes the right of the people to decide their food policies (Bernard et al., 2012; Beuchelt & Virchow, 2012; Cabannes et al., 2018; Holt-Giménez, 2017; López-Giraldo & Franco-Giraldo, 2015).

In this emerging new urban food agenda, the involvement of local governmental agencies in promoting local food supply systems has gained new momentum (Zerbian et al., 2022). This trend has been noted by several authors as the *“rise of municipalities”* in food policy reform (Mansfield & Mendes, 2013; Morley & Morgan, 2021) and has been developed, increasingly, through the emergence of the so-called urban food strategies (UFS). Because of the rapid population growth they are experimenting, especially in the Global South, small and intermediate cities have acquired renewed importance in the construction of ecologically and socially responsible agro-food projects (Civitaresi et al., 2019; FAO, 2019; O. López, 2024). These types of areas are considered to be key players in addressing food system challenges that create more sustainable foodscapes (Hawkes & Halliday, 2017; Manzano & Velázquez, 2015; Moragues-Faus, 2021).

However, the primary arenas for research and experimentation regarding urban food strategies have been the cosmopolitan cities of the Global North (Blay-Palmer, 2009; Ilieva, 2016; D. López et al., 2018). The latter have also been the main actors of the emergence of an innovative urban food

policy cross-scalar tool: the city food networks (Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, C40 and CITYFOOD, to name a few) that rely on cross-fertilising knowledge and experiences in order to reinforce a *“global system of sustainable food systems”* (Blay-Palmer et al., 2016; Moragues-Faus, 2021).

Due to its scale, impact and global reach the most important landmark of these international - and institutional - agreements has been the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP).¹ As its official webpage states, the pact is committed *“to develop sustainable food systems that are inclusive, resilient, safe and diverse, that provide healthy and affordable food to all people in a human rights-based framework, that minimize waste and conserve biodiversity while adapting to and mitigating impacts of climate change.”* The MUFPP is a concrete working tool that includes 37 recommended actions grouped in 6 categories and operates by fostering city to city cooperation and best practices exchange.

As we have suggested, northern cities not only showcase the most notable UFS, but they also host the headquarters of these key city food networks. As a result, those experiences are the most studied by scholars, leaving a gap in the study of urban food strategies in the Global South, particularly in Latin America. Argentina, for instance, has nine signatory cities of the MUFPP, including Rosario as one of the most advanced cities in terms of urban agroecology, but in most cases, there is no apparent comprehensive urban food strategy to account for. Nonetheless, Gualaguaychú, a city of 130,000 inhabitants internationally recognized for its environmental movement,² seems to be the scene of what Morgan (2009) considers a food planning movement, strengthened by an urban food strategy: the Healthy, Safe, and Sovereign Food Plan (HSSFP).³

Through a series of initiatives, like the creation of an agro-ecological colony and the promotion of Alternative Food Networks, the plan *“tends towards the progressive realization of local food sovereignty”*. However, notably enough, this city has not signed the MUFPP nor has linked with any city food network. Hence, it remains “hidden” from the international food planning community.

¹ Signed by 290 cities by the beginning of 2025. Some key actors for the installation of common interpretative frameworks, grouped around joint projects of FAO and the RUAF Foundation, were involved in the design of the Milan Pact, actively disseminated by FAO.

² In 2003, the construction of a cellulose plant on the shore of the Uruguay River burst the pulp mills conflict in Gualaguaychú. The citizens of Gualaguaychú initiated a movement of protest that soon transcended the local dimension as it is regarded and studied under the notion of ecological citizenship (Melo, 2020).

³ In Spanish: Plan de Alimentación Sana, Segura y Soberana. It began its implementation in 2018 but was institutionalised in 2021.

This paradox raises important questions about the visibility and legitimacy of urban food strategies beyond dominant governance frameworks as they fly under the radar with undiscovered and unshared learnings. Through the analysis of this initiative, the aim of this paper is to provide insight on how these types of policies work, what kind of challenges they face and how they align with international food policy frameworks, despite working “*behind their scenes*”. Results from this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the role that Alternative Food Networks can play in food planning approaches in the Global South. Additionally, it enhances knowledge of urban food strategies rooted in this context, highlighting the challenges of developing innovative policies when certain key factors—such as the continuity of the government and multistakeholder partnerships—are not in place nor well established.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study of urban food strategies (UFS)—comprehensive approaches that cities adopt to address food-related challenges—has become an increasingly significant area of scholarship. As Hawkes and Halliday (2017) noted, an urban food policy involves concerted actions by city governments to tackle these food related challenges. Within urban food policies, two primary approaches can be identified: integrated strategies that address multiple aspects of the food system simultaneously, and single-issue policies that focus on specific, targeted actions (Bricas et al., 2017; Calori et al., 2017). Moragues et al. (2013) define UFS as a “process consisting of how a city envisions change in its food system through a holistic framework that considers both horizontal and vertical dimensions of governance” (p. 6)—the former referring to the integration of multiple policy domains and stakeholders, and the latter encompassing coordination across different levels of government and food system stages.

Ilieva (2017), despite pointing out that there is no single definition of UFS, agrees with Moragues et al. (2013) by pointing out that this kind of initiatives provide a “roadmap” for how to improve the local food system. The mentioned authors also agree that UFS can take many forms as they can be implemented in a top-down or a bottom-up manner (a flexibility of particular importance in our case study) as they are highly conditioned by their local context, but they do catalyse new synergies between local stakeholders. We find that this term, Urban Food Strategy, is the most suitable to adopt in this article given the importance it confers to locality, to the action of different stakeholders and social movements, and due to the broad perspective of initiatives it encompasses.

Research conducted on urban food strategies presents a robust corpus that provides practical guidance on designing urban food strategies (Moragues Faus et al., 2013), insight on food governance practices (López-García et al.,

2020; Sonnino, 2016; Zerbán & De Luis Romero, 2023) and deep analysis regarding the monitoring and implementation frameworks, the ideological motivations, and the international food network integration of the UFS (Ilieva, 2017; López Cifuentes et al., 2021; Martín, 2019; Smaal et al., 2021). All in all, these works underscore the importance of urban food strategies as critical tools for addressing the complex challenges of urban food systems but also showcase the difficulties and barriers to implementing them.

We decided to analyse a specific UFS considering the insights provided by this international literature coupled with the policy cycle theory or sequential policy model, as the latter allows a deep understanding of how policies evolve over time. Policy cycle theory proves valuable from both descriptive and explanatory perspectives, even when some stages of the process remain incomplete or when the whole policy comes to a halt (Comba, 2006; Estévez, 2024; Jann & Wegrich, 2017; Nogueira, 1995).

Finally, given the relevant role that Alternative Food Networks (AFN) and Short Food Supply Chains (SFSC) play in urban food strategies and in our case study because of their promotion of healthier and environmentally friendly forms of production, we find it essential to rely on widely referenced studies in international and national literature (Caracciolo et al., 2012; Craviotti & Soleno Wilches, 2015; Goodman, 2003; Renting et al., 2003; Tarditti, 2012). We understand AFN as new organisational structures that carry the potential for political transformation but also as institutional models that promote an alternative rural development paradigm, which in our case refers to the agroecological transition. AFNs involve SFSCs that promote and strengthen physical, social and cultural proximity, by establishing trust bonds and shared values related to the specific attributes of the food. Furthermore, as we are interested in the logistical challenges that urban food strategies involve, we take into account those works that specifically consider these issues (Belletti & Marescotti, 2020; Cendón et al., 2023).

3. Methodology

This study is primarily based on a qualitative-exploratory analysis regarding the urban food strategy and food system of the city of Guleguaychú, located in the province of Entre Ríos, Argentina. Research involved the systematisation of first-hand interviews conducted with local agents, the examination of national census data and official municipal documents, and the review of specialised literature (Fig. 1).

These methods and sources were employed to characterise the local food supply system and its agents, to explain the challenges of the alternative food landscape, and to examine Guleguaychú's urban food strategy. The investigation covered the period between 2018–2024, from its beginning to the more recent situation of uncertainty regarding the continuity of the food plan.



Figure 1. Gualeguaychú's location in Argentina.

Regarding primary sources, we conducted 54 semi-structured interviews with a diverse range of 'food agents' in Gualeguaychú, to ensure that nearly all perspectives within the local food system were captured, with a focus on the fresh food sector (fruits and vegetables) because of its geographical proximity and importance for a healthy nutrition. We interviewed managers of retail stores (three), supermarkets (three), local farmers (seventeen), alternative food traders (three) and consumers (fifteen), qualified informants belonging to national agencies of rural development (nine) and policy makers of different administrations (four). These interviews were conducted between May 2022 and November 2024 and were transcribed immediately after fieldwork. Subsequently, they were analysed using Atlas.ti software through an initial coding of key concepts such as urban food strategy, food logistics, agroecology, and local production (with additional codes being incorporated as the analysis progressed).

What is more, we constructed a typology of the actors that sustain the conventional and alternative food supply system.

In relation to the urban food strategy investigated, the Healthy, Safe, and Sovereign Food Plan (HSSFP), we carried out: i) an examination of the phases of the local urban food strategy with a sequential policy model approach that includes the description and analysis of the following processes: agenda-setting, problem definition and policy formulation, implementation, evaluation, and interruption; ii) a detailed review of institutional documents of the HSSFP comparing its guidelines and objectives, as well as its measures, with the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact framework for action, considered as the most developed agreement of urban food policies up to now.

4. The Urban Food System and Supply of Gualeguaychú

Given Argentina's role as a major commodity exporter, Argentine food policies in the last fifty years have tended to focus more on concerns about food security, locally framed as the impact of food prices on the socio-economic conditions of society, rather than on adopting a comprehensive approach to food issues (Barsky, 2020; Borrás, 2013; Craviotti, 2022).

Food policies have manifested through assistance programs to the poor population complemented with the regulation of the prices of key food items through direct intervention or the appellation to the possibility of importing food, according to the orientation of national governments. In spite of a main focus on food security, food sovereignty was also considered in some conjunctures (Blasich, 2020). There have also been programs oriented to support family farming, but they did not address the structural limitations of the sector, so the trend towards land concentration has persisted over time.

Most of these programs have been designed by the national level; the legal framework limits the capacity of the urban governments to carry out development policies. Nonetheless, one big Argentinean city, Rosario, has been able to surpass these limitations, develop a globally recognized urban food policy⁴ that stands out as an example for the region and leads the way in terms of urban agroecology and innovative food policies that include food sovereignty at its core (Lattuca, 2011).

Within Argentina, Entre Ríos—the province where Gualeguaychú is located—exemplifies a territory that was rapidly integrated into the global agribusiness framework, becoming a key producer of export-oriented commodities such as soy, corn, wheat, and more recently, poultry. This area, situated in the eastern edge of the Pampas plains, has shifted from being a livestock-agricultural to an agricultural-livestock area

⁴ Despite having developed actions since 1989, Rosario joined the MUFPP in 2020 and holds, together with Belo Horizonte, the representation of South America in the MUFPP Central Committee. Due to its continuity, it is a well-known experience in international fora and has been awarded by the MUFPP in 2022 in the food production category. For more information see Dubbeling et al. (2016) and Tornaghi and Dehaene (2020).

(Crojethovich et al., 2012). According to Gualeguaychú's municipal Habitat Secretariat (2022), *"the main crop, nowadays, is soybean, followed by wheat and corn, all cultivated using the direct seeding technology package and the use of chemical inputs."*

In any case, this integration into international commodity chains, which is neither unique nor original to Entre Ríos but rather reflects Argentina's re-primarized accumulation model (Svampa, 2013), underscores the interruption of the state-planned projects of the mid-20th century that aimed to modify the province's agrarian structure, through the establishment of agricultural colonies that would supply its cities with local food.

While food planning was marginalised within state action, several phenomena at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century accelerated the decline of pre-existent regional and local horticultural belts. The growing urbanisation, the expansion of grain production, land concentration and the rise of supermarkets -usually multinational enterprises- pushed Gualeguaychú into food dependence.

"These processes of industrial agriculture have made it so that a working producer, whose main capital is his labour force, on an 80-hectare field, prefers to rent it out. So, that producer who 30 years ago had chickens, had a considerable vegetable garden with pumpkins is no longer there... (In that time) that production was sold locally." (Agricultural historian from Gualeguaychú, personal communication, August 2023)

"We had a cooperative here, a cold storage plant, we were surrounded by farms, and we [the people from Gualeguaychú] could consume our local production." (Consumer at a local alternative food retail shop, personal communication, 2022)

Currently, the provincial fruit and vegetable sector shows a poorly developed reality that forces the region to source externally up to 80% of its total demand of vegetables, according to estimates from the 2007/8 provincial horticultural census. Both state agents and qualified informants of Gualeguaychú (farmers, vegetable vendors and consumers) agree on two key issues: i) that the vast majority of fruits and vegetables consumed, except leafy vegetables, are not locally produced, highlighting the importance of the wholesale markets of Buenos Aires, Rosario, and Córdoba, situated at least 200 km. away; and ii) that during the early 2000s, many local farmers abandoned their activities.

"My father-in-law, who has worked in this (horticultural production), for 30–40 years, will tell you. There used to be more people producing and there was more local production." (Farmer of Plaza Belgrano Farmers Market, personal communication, August 2023)

In this context, most of Gualeguaychú's fruit and vegetable supply is managed by various agents who employ different logistical and commercial strategies to ensure food provision. These agents can be classified based on whether they engage (or not) in wholesale redistribution, along with secondary criteria such as their logistics of supply, scale of operation, capital resources, and their sourcing of locally produced vegetables. Despite their diversity, the most significant actors are multinational supermarkets that rely on extra-regional distribution centres and local greengrocers, who control their own logistics, transportation and networks, and thus operate as wholesale distributors within the city.

The fact that these agents are almost entirely supplied with fruits and vegetables from external sources (being leafy vegetables the exception) and of conventional food systems of production that rely heavily on agrochemicals, exposes how Gualeguaychú is being fed. These features partly explain why the urban food strategy initiated in Gualeguaychú aims to achieve a sociocultural shift towards food quality—understood as a polysemic category that encompasses aspects such as nutrition, cultural rootedness, and locality— and to enhance local production, along with a strong emphasis on food safety and health.

5. Gualeguaychú's Urban Food Strategy

Gualeguaychú's urban food strategy: the Healthy, Safe, and Sovereign Food Plan (HSSFP), inadvertently began its journey by 2015 with an isolated practice of local food procurement of a short number of public facilities. By 2018 it consciously took a step forward with a highly contested normative disruption, an ordinance that placed a ban on the use of glyphosate. This action framed in health concerns, paved the way for a more comprehensive and constructive approach that regarded its local food system as an integral field of action and transformation that would include health at its core but would focus on food.

This integral approach, the food plan, was based on specific ideological flags — food sovereignty and agroecological production— that reflected the viewpoint of those who participated in the formulation process. With a somewhat clear roadmap that lacked quantitative data but demonstrated a statement of intent -to achieve an agroecological food system transition-, Gualeguaychú's urban food strategy was officially established by 2021. In order to understand how and why this UFS was designed, how it was implemented, and with which actors, in the next paragraphs we follow the sequential policy model approach to further develop our critical examination of the policy.

A. How did "food" become a public policy in Gualeguaychú?

The local administration that would establish the HSSFP, reached the municipal government by 2015. These authorities were particularly bound to work on health issues as some of them, the mayor for instance, were healthcare

professionals themselves. This is why the incoming government platform included the project of establishing a local vegetable production, free of agrochemicals, to guarantee the local procurement of public facilities, specifically those for early childhood. However, the development of a comprehensive urban food strategy aligned with the idea of food sovereignty was not yet part of the agenda.

The Municipal Food Production Centre⁵ was established by September of 2017 in 6 hectares that were obtained on a loan by the municipality. Its management was commended to a cooperative organisation. Official data reveals that during its first 8 months, the project produced approximately 25 thousand kilos of vegetables such as: chard, parsley, squash, green onion, cucumber, beet, celery, cabbage, and melon.

This experience resembled more of a single-issue policy that focused on a targeted action than an integrated food strategy. However, this approach was bound to an early shift as the growing national, regional and local concern regarding illnesses (cancer being the most notable) connected to the excessive use of agrochemicals (glyphosate) in areas devoted to grain production sparked a nationwide dispute over the safety and sustainability of Argentinian food systems (Blois, 2017; Carrasco et al., 2012).

This national concern over agrochemicals was reflected in the emergence of a national movement that included the networking of social movements, academic researchers and professional associations of which the “Network of Fumigated Towns” was the most recognized (Berger, 2020). As their collective and grassroots actions sparked numerous municipal interventions in the Pampas region, which usually limited the range of use of agrochemicals (particularly glyphosate) within cities’ limits, and Gualaguaychú’s society also had health concerns of its own, the situation nudged local authorities to push on this agenda.

The growing number of cancer diseases among local society and the infamous case of a child intoxicated by agrochemicals not only led to the conformation of a local organisation called “Stop Cancer”, that orchestrated numerous mobilisations but also drove the local authorities to finance an epidemiological study of cancer.⁶ The study found that, overall, the behaviour over time of cancer mortality rates in Gualaguaychú showed a relatively increased risk in the city but there was no relevant annual difference (between the city and what national statistics showed) in the total number of diagnosed cases.

Simultaneously, the local authorities strived to discover the elements that were causing cancer. According to the Health Office Director of the time, they found that the

main reasons were issues related to food, water (its components), and, ultimately, the underlying production model that required lots of external inputs to function. What is more, they realised that Gualaguaychú lacked specific legislation for its predominantly rural areas (30,225 hectares of 33,000), despite them being most of the territory.

So, those internal reports and the results of the epidemiologic investigation, plus the society support, legitimised the decision to promote legislation- the same day the results of the report were publicly presented- to regulate and prohibit the existence of glyphosate in the city: the Ordinance N° 12.216/2018. At this point, as the focus of the issue was shifting towards the characteristics of the local food system, local authorities began to consider the option of formulating a comprehensive urban food policy. To do so, the ecologist⁷ blueprint of the local authorities led them to convene various food-related experts from other areas of the country closely linked to the food sovereignty movement to develop and steer an action plan.

With this joint vision, that did not include every local food stakeholder nor relied on a detailed background and baseline research, the Healthy, Safe, and Sovereign Food Plan (HSSFP) began to be conceived and designed.

“It’s useless to change the entire production model—stop spraying poison on the population, care for the air, the soil, and the people—if you’re still eating poorly. If food doesn’t become the essence of life, the effort is wasted. Eating junk and unhealthy food doesn’t just lead to hunger and malnutrition; even children from wealthy families suffer from poor nutrition. In other words, focusing on only one aspect isn’t enough. You could change a community’s diet—if that were possible based solely on intentions—but if the surrounding environment remains contaminated with substances like chlorinated compounds or other harmful chemicals, the impact will be limited.” (HSSFP coordinator, personal communication, August 2023)

So, this process of agenda setting demanded a thorough political action. As we have seen, the first intervention involved the ban of glyphosate and established itself as the first legislative precedent (in 2018) of the future urban food strategy that would not be enacted until April 2021. However, during that period, several other local legislations related to food issues were passed: the declaration of municipal interest in family agriculture (2020), the municipal adherence to Sustainable Development Goals (2020) and the incorporation to the National Network of Municipalities and Communities that promote agroecology (RENAMA) in 2021, being the most notorious.

⁵ In Spanish: Centro de Producción de Alimentos Municipal.

⁶ The study evaluated cancer incidence between 2000 and 2011 and mortality between 2000 and 2015.

⁷ Dating from the international pulp mill conflict that developed in Gualaguaychú in the mid-2000s (Merlinsky, 2008).

Table I. Alignment between food sovereignty principles and the healthy, safe, and sovereign food plan (HSSFP)

Food Sovereignty principles from La Via Campesina (1996)	HSSFP measures
Agrarian reform	Create an agroecological colony by loaning municipal owned land to a farmer's organization
Protecting natural resources	Ban glyphosate, promote agroecology, create a bio-factory
Reorganizing the food trade	Promote short food supply chains and build a Municipal Market
Democratic control	Establish a multi stakeholder food policy council and specific sectoral boards

Source: Own elaboration based on official documentation of the HSSFP.

These municipal ordinances laid the institutional and political groundwork for the comprehensive agro-food policy that was taking shape. They also hinted at an emerging human rights-based approach that would become the cornerstone of the plan, which was complemented by a strong emphasis on food sovereignty.

B. The Healthy, Safe, and Sovereign Food Plan: A holistic strategy

The HSSFP was institutionalised through a municipal legislation that included a series of official comprehensive strategic documents through which the general framework of the program and its formulation was communicated. The strategic document contained: the rationale, objectives, target audience, scope, and lines of action. The rationale was supported by two central principles: i) that food was a human right and that the State—in all its levels—had the obligation to guarantee accessibility; ii) that the primary food production system was in crisis and required an intervention to enable a transition to agroecological production processes that promote human well-being and environmental conservation.

Reading those documents, the HSSFP, already from its name and its strong emphasis on food as a basic human right, aligned itself with the ideals of food sovereignty. The fact that many of its measures line up with the food sovereignty principles from La Via Campesina (1996), as shown in Table I, evidence this viewpoint. The plan appealed to ideals of food justice that include the democratic participation of all stakeholders and the conservation and restoration of ecological systems.

To achieve these purposes and follow those principles, the objectives of the UFS were grouped into four thematic fields: a) Production, processing, and commercialisation; b) Environmental awareness and responsible consumption; c) Training and knowledge; d) Communication. These thematic fields were integrated by sub-items such as: a.i) Promotion of the local production of pesticide-free foods; b.i) Generation of responsible consumption habits and healthy eating throughout the local population; c.i) Research projects on the local production system, readiness for transition, interests, and demands of the sector; d.i) Creation of an obser-

vatory of production and healthy eating with local, provincial, and national experiences and a food policy council.

Programmatically, to organise the achievement of the proposed objectives, the plan was structured through five lines of action: i) Research; ii) Training; iii) Advisory and production; iv) Communication; v) Articulations and alliances.

These lines of action represent the paths for the implementation of the policy. They fulfil the same ordering function as the strategic action framework of the MUFPP by guiding the implementation process. Regarding the target audience and scope of the policy, they aim to operate over the whole department of Gualeguaychú and remain consistent with the notion of sustaining a public policy aligned with the Sustainable Local Development goals.

C. How was the HSSFP implemented?

The implementation is considered the materialisation phase of the policy and, therefore, the essence of any public policy. While this phase constitutes the effective execution of tasks it also includes monitoring and evaluation work and may also include the actions prior to the sanction of the plan, such as the “glyphosate ban”, because they specify policy goals and provide political support. What is more, the responsibilities to oversee and develop the policy should be established during this phase.

The enactment of the HSSFP explicitly stated in Article 3 that the Secretary of Social Development, Environment and Health was entrusted with executing the policy. However, it was also stated in Article 4 that the HSSFP must be transversal to all areas. This approach was meant to enhance “Horizontal city-level governance” (one of the urban food policies enabling factors according to Hawkes and Halliday, 2017) and to include several departments engaged with and committed to the policy.

“The HSSFP is transversal (horizontal) to all departments. The HSSFP is integrated by the departments of production, environment, bromatology, veterinary medicine, social development, health, and social economy.” (Bromatology Department Member, personal communication, August 2023)

Table 2. Food matrix

Type of production	Origin of production		
	Gualeguaychú	Regional	National
Agroecological	Local labour+healthy food	Regional labour+healthy food	Healthy food
In transition to agroecological	Local labour	Regional labour	
Agroindustrial	Local labour	Regional labour	

Source: Own elaboration based on official documentation of the HSSFP. HSSFP: Healthy, safe, and sovereign food plan.

Despite the virtue of this approach, its execution proved to be too horizontal to actually strengthen the implementation of practices, as there was no specific governance body structure of the HSSFP to ensure accountability, nor did external stakeholders (outside the municipality) have clarity about the main institutional actors of the policy. That is why eventually the policy found its institutional place at the Environmental department.

“At first, the HSSFP was very transversal to the municipal government due to the complexity of the program. In other words, we (nutritionists, food scientists, administrators, etc.) understood that we were all contributing to making healthy, safe and sovereign food. The perspective was to understand life from another place, to “imitate” how the “monte” (forest) works. That (transversality-horizontal governance) was a virtue, without a doubt, but we (local governments and authorities) are not prepared to work with that scheme. Then, a year or two later, it (the HSSFP) had to be anchored.” (HSSFP coordinator, personal communication, August 2023)

After addressing the governance of the policy, the plan’s roadmap required budgeting and further clarification. Regarding funding, the plan received a national endowment for nearly 200.000 dollars and obtained 185.000 dollars via the municipal budget in 2022. Regarding clarification, conceptual tools like “scenario construction” are often employed during implementation to guide actions, and in Gualeguaychú, this framework was effectively applied. Using a rapid assessment, the municipality’s technical teams developed a food matrix (Table 2) that mapped the geographical origin of food consumed in Gualeguaychú. This matrix served as the foundation for defining the “base scenario” of the local food system and envisioning a “desired scenario” to guide the UFS efforts.

The trajectory from the “Supply and consumption of national and agro-industrial food production” (considered the “baseline” scenario, as informal official data suggests that only 5%–8% of food was produced locally), to the “Supply and consumption of local and agroecological food production” situation (considered

to be the “desired” scenario) was meant to include the passage through intermediate stages of regional food production (hence, moving from the right bottom quadrant in red to the upper left quadrant in green) that were also considered an improvement of the initial scenario.

Moreover, that progression, and every other practice within the food plan for that matter, also took into account the estimation of how much food the department required to be fed. For that purpose, according to the dietary official guidelines for the Argentine population, Gualeguaychú needed per month: 1,200,000 litres of milk and yogurt, 72,000 kg of fresh cheese, 100,000 dozen of eggs, 312,000 tons of meat, 960,000 kg of vegetables, 720,000 kg of fruit, 72,000 kg of oil, seed and dried fruits, and 4,800,000 litres of safe water.

Even though the food demand estimates were more a declaration of intent than an actual achievable goal, every practice and measure carried out had in its core the idea of shortening the distance between the baseline and the desired scenario. Therefore, the main practices of the UFS were aimed at increasing the volume of local produce and strengthening commercialisation (and healthy consumption) through short food supply chains. Within the first realm, the creation of an agroecological colony was the key initiative (arguably the most important project of the policy), alongside a Participatory Local Agroecological Guarantee System that could not be established. The opening of a Municipal Market represented the main effort in terms of food supply and distribution.

Regarding the agroecological colony, its construction began with the decision (disputed by environmentalist groups and political opposition) of developing agroecological production sites in a municipal-owned natural reserve called “Las Piedras”, that was previously loaned to private users.⁸ The local authorities decided to reorganise the use of these 300 hectares and destinate 60 to agroecological production (and let the rest for conservation purposes) complemented by the instalment of a biofactory to supply organic inputs to the producers of the colony and other areas of Gualeguaychú. This biofactory produced up to eight thousand liters of bioles⁹ annually since 2020.

⁸ Who developed a racetrack venture and established an agrarian school.

⁹ Liquid fertilizers made from whey and bovine manure, essential inputs to ensure agricultural production without agrochemicals.

“The challenge of conserving and producing, and producing while conserving, was an interesting objective.” (HSSFPP coordinator, personal communication, August 2023)

To do so, the municipality signed a management agreement in 2021 with a farmer organisation, the “Union of Land Workers (ULW-UTT),¹⁰ notable for its agroecological and food sovereignty viewpoints that vindicate a national land reform (Acero Lagomarsino, 2022; Sotiru, 2021). The ULW-UTT was “loaned” with 15 hectares of land to be worked by 10 farmer families belonging to the organisation. The referred agreement also included the municipal commitment to build houses for these families (on additional land inside the conservation area). ULW-UTT farmers assumed the compromise of delivering 20% of its produce to public facilities. However, as the main members of the organization are farmers of the Buenos Aires horticultural belt, this meant that the members of the colony would not belong to Gualaguaychú. This would later prove to be a problem as local stakeholders felt undervalued within the UFS.

Despite the colony’s primary focus on horticultural production, it was sought to include egg, fruit, and honey production, along with regenerative livestock. While the project initially benefited from national and municipal funding, as well as political support, after two years of operation it only managed to cultivate three hectares of horticulture (with the labour of two farmers that established themselves in “Las Piedras” during 2020) and to hold, discontinuously, a mobile chicken coop for 200 chickens. Despite the lack of houses (they were never constructed) being a big factor of these shortcomings, other issues also took their toll.

“It’s a combination of things: working with the municipality is slow; in Gualaguaychú, summers are extremely hot, and lettuce gets scorched, while in winter, it’s very cold, so lettuce, chard, and beets also suffer from frost damage; accessibility to Las Piedras is impossible when it rains; most farmers want to have dogs, but here, it’s not feasible; waste management is another issue—there’s a habit of separating waste here. So, starting a farm from scratch in a new province is quite a big challenge.” (ULW Farmer in Gualaguaychú, personal communication, June 2022)

Furthermore, the ULW, the managing organization, faced challenges to allocate sufficient resources and attention to the colony, as it was engaged in multiple advocacy efforts at national, regional, and local levels due to its rise in public and political exposure amid high-level national political commitment during the period of 2019–2023. Nevertheless, compounding these issues, a political shift in 2024 led to reduced backing from authorities, halting progress during a contentious election year.

This process reveals the coexistence of two contrasting policy implementation perspectives. On one hand, it can be seen as a bottom-up initiative, given its alliance with a national stakeholder that represented and advocated for the demands of small agroecological farmers: the ULW-UTT. On the other hand, local stakeholders perceived it as a top-down, vertical practice, feeling excluded from the process and viewing the new, “foreign” actor, as disproportionately prioritized, although support to local horticultural farmers was also given, and a cooperative of local producers was also created with the help of the local government.

Lastly, the HSFPP also promoted community gardens through advice and training workshops, assistance with tools and biological inputs, and seed and seedlings distribution alongside the National Institute of Agricultural Technology. At some point during 2020 there were up to 500 vegetable gardens functioning in the city according to the authorities interviewed.

“We work with different types of gardens because there are institutional gardens—such as those in health centres or schools—that serve an educational or social support purpose; family gardens; and collective-process gardens, such as community-popular gardens. Or even the biopark [Colonia Las Piedras], which works similarly to Rosario’s community gardens.” (Member of the Social Economy department, virtual interview, November 2022)

When it comes to food supply and distribution, two main practices were implemented: the establishment of the “Nutrir Program”, and the promotion of alternative short food supply chains of which the creation of the Municipal Market was the main accomplishment.

The *Nutrir Program* (now called *IgualAR* under the new administration) is a state-funded initiative that began in 2021. The municipality provided a registered credit card, loaded with either 25,000 or 60,000 Argentine pesos,¹¹ to 2,150 low-income families in 2023 to enhance food security. Eventually, the *Nutrir* team managed to incorporate the Municipal Market into the stores that could accept the *Nutrir* card, nudging the recipients towards the adoption of more sustainable diets. But they could not convince farmer’s market members to get a bank account and be able to accept the card instead of cash.

Regarding the enhancement of short food supply chains, its goal was to facilitate the commercialisation of local production directly from its producers; hence benefiting local farmers and guaranteeing the physical and economic access of agroecological food to local society. The HSFPP input was to guide on bromatological and productive issues, and counsel on the procurement of funding, apart from guaranteeing a public space for the farmers markets and providing sponsorship and publicity.

¹⁰ In Spanish: *Unión de Trabajadores de la Tierra*.

¹¹ Approximately 86 and 205 US dollars monthly considering the official exchange rate annual average.

As a matter of fact, the establishment of short food chains has been notable in the city. A new farmer market that involved the participation and strengthened the work of three new agroecological farmers¹² was set up in 2021 (the Belgrano Square Agroecological Farmers Market) and a food cooperative that holds an agroecological and social economy approach was formalised in 2021 (Demicheli & Craviotti, 2023). Additionally, the Municipal Market was launched at the end of the same year. These three new agroecological experiences added up to the pre-existing Green Farmers Market -whose three farmers¹³ began an agroecological transition under the HSFPP and together multiplied the availability of spaces for purchasing healthy and mainly locally produced food.

These AFN show diversity from the organisational point of view (direct marketing from the producers, initiatives managed by solidarity intermediaries and a state-managed producer-to-consumer market) and regarding the qualities of food they sell. Food may be organic, such as the “yerba mate” offered by Ñande cooperative; agroecological, like the vegetables at Belgrano Square and the fruits at the Municipal Market; transitioning to agroecological, as the vegetables at the Green Farmers Market; or conventionally produced by a cooperative, like the rice and pasta sold at the Municipal Market.¹⁴ But, aside from seasonal vegetables, most of these products are predominantly sourced from non-local producers, accessed through urban agroecological operators located in Buenos Aires wholesale market. These nonlocal agents guarantee a continuous supply throughout the year of certain types of agroecological, organic, and/or cooperative food. Thus, coordination with these actors allows the local AFN to expand their food offering to consumers and specialized wholesalers stand out as critical agents from the logistical point of view (Craviotti & Demicheli, 2023).

Finally, in other areas of the food strategy, although the HSSFP envisaged actions related to research, communication, food waste and organising stakeholder participation- results have been somewhat limited. When it comes to research and communication, two scientific congresses on food, agroecology, and food sovereignty were held to share the achievements and raise awareness. Regarding food waste, the “EcoPark”, a waste separation plant founded in 2014, managed to process approximately five tons of food waste per week at its peak. Finally, regarding the “horizontal” city level governance, while there have been efforts to establish sectoral stakeholder boards to swiftly introduce the idea of forming a food policy council, these initiatives did not materialise into a consolidated entity. As a result, the UFS reflected more of a top-down approach with little horizontal governance or participatory multi stakeholder processes, a key aspect to develop rootedness in the local society.

D. The interruption of the UFS

In the case of the HSSFP, an institutionalised evaluation - that should allow the understanding and analysis of the impacts and results of the policy-, whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed, has not been developed and no indicators have been constructed. Similarly, the UFS has not reached an official reformulation phase, even though many practices were transformed and adjusted permanently. The primary explanation for these shortcomings lies in financial constraints, inadequate participatory policy processes, scarce data collection, political timing, insufficient institutional capacities and, most notably, the change in municipal leadership following the 2023 elections.

In fact, the administration that implemented the HSSFP failed to secure re-election, and an ideologically opposed party assumed power, choosing not to continue the policy. As a result, many initiatives that were incorporated into the food plan documents were left incomplete or never initiated at all.

Why did the HSSFP come to a halt? There are several reasons that explain this decision: i) there was a change in the political atmosphere at the national, provincial and municipal sphere, implying a shift towards neoliberal-conservative approaches. New authorities do not “believe” in agroecology as a valid, comprehensive food system approach, nor do they think the current food system is in crisis; ii) the new government has stronger ties to agribusiness stakeholders, as evidenced by their sponsorship of the revocation of the glyphosate ban in October 2024; iii) the HSSFP did not have enough support from local society nor productive stakeholders; iv) the agroecological colony did not show sufficient progress, and v) the Municipal Market was unable to establish itself as a regular destination for neighbours to purchase food (it was located too far away from the city centre) even though eventually, it established a program called “The Market in your neighbourhood” to tackle the challenge of making agroecological food accessible for the low-income families.

6. A Hidden Urban Food Strategy?

Now we can answer one of the main questions we asked in the Introduction. How did this Argentinian UFS relate to an international city food network such as the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact? Argentinian cities, with the notable exception of Rosario, have not been too interested in being part of the new international food agenda nor in constructing Latin American city food networks. Despite this fact, the MUFPP appears to be the main stage of participation as nine (9) Argentinian cit-

¹² Each of these farmers produce on one hectare of land.

¹³ Each of these farmers produce on two hectares of land (Demicheli & Craviotti, 2023; Pérez, 2020).

¹⁴ These categories are not mutually exclusive—food can be both agroecological and cooperative, highlighting the intersection of sustainable practices and collective efforts.

Table 3. Actions of the HSSFP in terms of the MUFPP framework

HSSFP framework for action	Actions - HSSFP	N° actions of the MUFPP
Production, added value, and commercialisation	Promote local production of pesticide-free foods. Strengthen and add value to the primary production of healthy foods. Encourage the development and economic viability of short food supply chains that allow safe access to healthy foods. Contribute to the understanding of climate change, its causes and consequences, and the mitigation and adaptation measures of the production practices.	20° - Promote and strengthen urban and periurban food production based on sustainable approaches. 24° - Help provide services to food producers. 25° - Support short food chains. 32° - Expand support for infrastructure related to food market systems. 34° - Convene food system actors to assess and monitor food loss and waste. 35° - Raise awareness of food loss and waste.
Environmental community and responsible consumption	Create responsible consumption and healthy eating habits among the entire local population. Empower organisations and social groups in Gualeguaychú committed to environmental care and sustainable development. Influence the food supply and diets habits of public schools that have cafeterias.	7° - Promote sustainable diets and nutrition. 2° - Enhance stakeholder participation. 30° - Review public procurement. 15° - Reorientate school feeding programmes.
Training and knowledge generation	Study of risk perception and vulnerability of different social sectors of the Gualeguaychú population.	8° -Address diseases associated with poor diets and obesity.
Communication	Create an observatory of “health and nutritive production” with local, provincial, and national agents. Generate networks of responsible producers and consumers. Offer training and peer to peer exchange opportunities on addressing environmental issues in the media.	5° -Develop multisectoral information systems. 18° - Promote networks and grassroots activities. 19° - Promote education, training and research.

HSSFP: Healthy, safe, and sovereign food plan; MUFPP: Milan urban food policy pact.

ies have signed it,¹⁵ even though, for the most part - if not entirely - they exhibit specific practices (working on one or two categories of the framework for action) or do not have a practice at all (almost 50% do not have a practice).¹⁶

However, we have argued that this is not the whole reality as Gualeguaychú had an urban food strategy although the city did not sign any international agreements, meaning it operated behind the scenes of the international city food network. So, given that the MUFPP is the most influential city food network in Argentina and probably of the world, how can we situate the HSSFP's strategy, compared to the MUFPP's framework for action? Could a significant difference between the two approaches be the reason why Gualeguaychú opted not to sign the pact or join any other international food network?

The results presented in Table 3 show that the framework for action of the HSSFP and the MUFPP were actually aligned. As previously stated, Gualeguaychú's UFS presented (although not always completely addressed) actions that relate to all the practice categories (6) the MUFPP proposes as framework for action: Governance, Sustainable diets and Nutrition, Social and Economic Equity, Food Production, Food Supply and Distribution and Food Waste. We can identify various measures the HSSFP implemented that aligned with the MUFPP actions:

- HSSFP creation of an agrarian colony - agricultural park-sustains MUFPP action N° 23 “*Protect and enable secure access and tenure to land for sustainable production in urban and peri urban areas*” (Food production).

¹⁵ Tandil- Esteban Echeverría - San Antonio de Areco - Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires - Rosario - Santa Fe - Córdoba - Godoy Cruz - Río Grande.

¹⁶ According to the MUFPP official website, the following signatory cities do not present any practice at all: Tandil, Esteban Echeverría, Santa Fe and Godoy Cruz.

- HSSFP construction of a biofactory to supply organic inputs to producers may be included within MUFPP action N° 24 “*Help provide services to food producers*” (Food production).
- The fact that HSSFP was envisioned as transversal to all management and institutionalised via municipal legislation, relates to MUFPP action N° 1 “*Facilitate collaboration across city agents and departments*” (Governance).
- HSSFP “Nutrir program” (a registered credit card containing state funds to spend on food) to support food security and nudge consumption towards healthy choices is essentially, MUFPP action N° 14 “*Use cash and food transfers*” (Social and economic equity).

Then, what could have been the reasons for opting to not engage with the MUFPP or any other city food network? According to the local authorities interviewed -coordinators and members of the HSSFP- there were at least three (3) reasons that explain this:

- I. There was a strong desire to build on local methodologies with local and national experts, creating distance from external influences to foster independence and sovereignty.
- II. Reflecting on external experiences from other cities was not part of the formulation process, even though the individuals that participated in them may have had references about some of them. Consequently, worldwide urban food strategies experiences were mostly unknown or at least not clearly incorporated into the strategy.
- III. There was a sense of alert or aversion to joining supranational institutional frameworks as those highly institutionalised arenas were viewed as instruments for the “maintenance of the status quo”. They were understood as strengthened by organisations that do not belong to the Global South which, to accept participation may require to compromise or to agree on certain issues that local authorities may be resistant to accept.

So, joining a highly institutionalized network, such as the one sponsored by the FAO, was not even considered an option. Their decision was not a rejection of the MUFPP itself but rather a refusal to engage with the international urban food policy arena. Instead, they chose to remain “hidden.”

As stated before, the reasons they remained “behind the scenes” of international city food networks and urban food policy arenas were primarily ideological, rather than pragmatic or operational. HSSFP’s commitment to principles of social justice, agroecology, and food sovereignty may be seen as values that serve as banners of resistance and alternatives strongly tied to social movements from the Global South. These principles are less integrated into the urban food strategies of the Global North (Smaal et al., 2021). This ideological positioning

helps to explain the reluctance of key local actors to engage with institutions perceived as colonialist organizations of the Global North, reflecting a conscious effort to prevent institutional co-optation (Altieri & Nicholls, 2012; Giraldo & Rosset, 2016; Laforge et al., 2017). This perspective suggests that the Global South may serve as a more likely host for these “hidden” UFS—a line of inquiry that warrants further exploration.

Then, should the South build its own city food networks or overcome differences and join these global structures? Which would be the pros and cons of both alternatives? Whatever the answer might be, as recent as 2024, a new network called “Intermediate cities and food systems network”,¹⁷ has been leading the way in the South. However, as this new network holds sponsorship from supranational institutions like FAO, concerns about external influence and control may persist.

Lastly, while we can only speculate whether signing the MUFPP or joining any city food network would have ensured a better implementation of the food strategy, the acquisition of additional funds, or, most importantly, the continuity of the policy—a key factor for the success of food policies, often defined as “political commitment that transcends electoral cycles” and “participatory policy process” (Hawkes & Hallday, 2017)—integrating this kind of networks could have been beneficial, at least, for strengthening the evaluation phase. This could have been achieved by adapting the MUFPP’s indicators to align with local characteristics. Ultimately, a crucial question arises: does joining a city food network truly guarantee the continuity of urban food systems?

7. Conclusion

Having begun the paper by showcasing—and perhaps aiming to highlight—southern urban food strategies in intermediate cities that rely on the functioning of alternative food networks, we found that in Gualeguaychú there is still a predominance of a strongly consolidated, conventional food system that does not necessarily value food as the *grand social connector* we believe it to be.

At first glance, recognizing the hegemony (in terms of capitalization, impact, scale, and presence) of conventional circuits might be disappointing for the *sitopic* reader. However, this analysis has also allowed us to acknowledge the existence of alternative, agroecological marketing experiences that increasingly incorporate the participation of traditional and emerging local horticultural producers, who despite the interruption of the UFS continue to operate. The strengthening of these actors in a context mediated by the precedent, almost unique in our country, of an urban food strategy grounded in a human rights and food sovereignty perspective needs to be recognized and valued.

¹⁷ In Spanish: *Red de Ciudades Intermedias y Sistemas Alimentarios*.

Guauguaychú's HSSFP aimed "*towards the progressive realisation of local food sovereignty*" through the implementation of a five-dimension framework for action and outlined a series of practices that encompass all the lines of action proposed by the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP). As it also introduces the urban environment as the primary territory of intervention, we may conclude that the HSSFP qualifies as an Urban Food Strategy that effectively aligns with many of the objectives set by the MUFPP.

Nonetheless, this alignment did not translate into networking with the MUFPP or with any other city food network. As this decision appears to be intentional -due to ideological reasons-, we qualify it as a "hidden urban food strategy". In a first stance we wondered whether this political and symbolic decision was worth it or if ideology outweighed the practical benefits of joining a global alliance that guarantees international legitimacy to certain local processes and could potentially ensure the continuity of a project, making it more resistant to municipal electoral cycles. Now, recognizing the interruption of the policy, that question remains unanswered and more relevant than ever.

In this sense, even though we cannot guarantee that being part of a food network is a sufficient condition to ensure the continuation of UFS, we do think that promoting a better and true involvement of local actors in the design and implementation—allowing them to have a voice and negotiate with external stakeholders—helps to sustain a policy. Having monitoring indicators also contributes by enabling the systematization of results and making them visible for the community and for the incoming authorities.

When it comes to its implementation, the HSSFP was analysed in line with the "*public policy cycle*" theory, though it did not complete all the phases. The proponents of the HSSFP clearly identified a problem to be addressed: the existence of a food production model in crisis, and they consciously incorporated it into their political platform. From that point onwards, they simultaneously advanced in the formulation, enactment and implementation of the policy despite the numerous challenges (not always surpassed) presented: the establishment of a multistakeholder policy process to improve food democracy, the elaboration of adequate monitoring mechanisms, the collection of data to make the right technical decisions, and finally the ability to surpass political discrepancies.

Despite its drawbacks, many implementation measures have been successful and stand out as significant policy achievements. These include the growth in the number of local agroecological farmers -although still low-, the establishment of some alternative marketing spaces where local producers can sell at fair prices, the improvement of consumer access to local and agroecological food, and the creation of an agroeco-

logical colony -agricultural park- (now dismantled). Additionally, while the institutionalization of the UFS and food-related legislation made the policy legally binding and was a significant milestone, it ultimately proved to be insufficient.

Regarding the AFN in Guauguaychú, even though its supply depends partly on food produced in other regions and despite the lack of quantitative data to fully understand the impact of such alternative food experiences and their potential to scale up agroecology in all its dimensions, the presence of different short and alternative food supply chains remains significant because, as Glanz et al. (2005) observed, "*the availability of spaces for purchasing 'healthy/local' food defines a food environment, which in turn affects eating habits*"—a critical element in building a more liveable, just, and healthy reality.

All in all, weighing the contributions and limitations of the HSSFP, the promise of building a fairer, healthier, and more sovereign food reality remains within reach through urban food policies—provided they maintain continuity over time. This potential persists even when these policies develop outside international frameworks and take shape in the Global South. However, continuity and impact are not guaranteed by institutionalization alone. The experience of Guauguaychú underscores that meaningful, long-term transformation depends on deep local engagement, adaptive governance, and mechanisms that ensure resilience beyond political cycles. If urban food strategies are to be truly transformative, they must not only secure legal recognition but also cultivate strong social foundations that empower local actors to sustain and expand their efforts. The engaged actors in cities like Guauguaychú exemplify this possibility, demonstrating that even in challenging contexts, alternative food networks and agroecological movements can endure and inspire broader systemic change.

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