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**Citation:** Zerbian, T., Adams, M., Dooris, M. & Pool, U. (2022). The Role of Local Authorities in Shaping Local Food Systems. *Sustainability*, 14(19), 12004. doi: 10.3390/su141912004

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## Article

# The Role of Local Authorities in Shaping Local Food Systems

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**Abstract:** Given the importance that current food-related challenges pose to our society, the potential of local food initiatives to address sustainability has gained increased attention. Nevertheless, research has increasingly demonstrated that local food initiatives are limited in fulfilling their sustainability potential. This realisation has led many scholars to argue that the path towards food system transformation needs to be based on interconnected networks of these ‘alternative’ practices—what this paper terms local food systems. Nevertheless, as many local food initiatives rely on funding and volunteer work, their capacity to create infrastructures for integrated approaches is limited. In this context, influential players—those who can provide resources, such as local authorities—become key in the assemblage of local food systems. However, there is limited understanding of how the role of local authorities affects the internal dynamics of local food systems and potential outcomes. This study addresses this research gap by analysing two case studies (Preston, England and Vitoria-Gasteiz, Basque Country). Using urban political ecology (UPE) as a theoretical framework, this study offers original insight into the key governance elements affecting the direction of local food systems and thus the alignment of diverse local food initiatives, limiting their sustainability potential.

**Keywords:** local food system; urban political ecology; urban governance; food policy; collective change; sustainable food system



**Citation:** Zerbian, T.; Adams, M.; Dooris, M.; Pool, U. The Role of Local Authorities in Shaping Local Food Systems. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 12004. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su141912004>

Academic Editor: Francesco Caracciolo

Received: 24 August 2022

Accepted: 20 September 2022

Published: 22 September 2022

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## 1. Introduction

The collateral effects of the conventional food system are not new. Evidence has increasingly demonstrated that the conventional food system has caused health-related problems such as obesity, socioeconomic inequalities, biodiversity loss, and increased greenhouse gas emissions [1–5]. As a reaction to these dynamics, alternative food structures have emerged worldwide in the form of *local food initiatives* [6]. Local food initiatives usually aim to create fairer relations between food system actors through food relocalisation, introduce more sustainable production and distribution models, and build more democratic cooperation systems [7]. Examples include farmers markets, food cooperatives, community gardens, and buying groups [8,9]. However, evidence suggests that these practices have considerable limitations in ensuring sustainability, as they can perpetuate injustices within food systems by excluding impoverished communities due to price and cultural barriers [10,11].

As a result, researchers increasingly argue that collaborations between local food initiatives are necessary to create a stronger food movement [12,13]. This has led to examinations of the facilitators of and barriers to increased alliances between local food initiatives [14]. These studies mainly focus on the dynamics of why and how interconnected *local food systems*—collaborative networks that integrate the efforts of local food initiatives—are formed [15]. For example, Sbicca et al. [16] and Ghose and Pettygrove [17] demonstrate that the uneven distribution of resource balances of money, land, and labour shape the possibilities to build synergies between the components of local food systems. Significantly, the priorities advanced by local food systems as a whole are influenced by the expectations and agendas of influential players within a locality, especially those who can provide resources such as local authorities [16]. This eventually can constrain the potential of collectivising efforts, as uneven resource distribution means frequent competition amongst

local food initiatives [17]. This draws attention to the ways in which socio-institutional environments, particularly the role of local authorities and related governance instruments, influence the articulation of interconnected local food systems in such a way that their sustainability potential is realised.

Over the years, it has been argued that urban food governance could be a key strategy used by local authorities in convening a supportive local socio-institutional environment with the potential to build synergies across local food initiatives [18,19]. Urban food governance usually refers to the implementation of innovative operational and decision-making mechanisms for local food policymaking and the implementation of actions deriving from the strategies developed in this process [20]. There are two major, and closely connected, urban food governance mechanisms: multi-stakeholder platforms and urban food strategies, with local government acting as a key player within both [21]. Multi-stakeholder platforms usually take the form of food policy councils, which can have a public or civil society structure, and aim to bring together diverse local food initiatives, local authorities, and other actors to influence policies or implement specific projects [22]. These platforms are usually connected to the development and implementation of urban food strategies—specific policy documents or processes that aim to set out actions for the achievement of a commonly agreed goal within the local food system [23,24].

Given the importance of resource availability and stability across time, it is argued that local authorities should take a leadership role in initiating, shaping, and implementing urban food governance processes [25–27]. Nevertheless, increased attention to the processes that lead to urban food governance mechanisms highlights that the degree of support of local authorities varies according to political will, availability of resources, and the governance culture of participation within these institutions [28,29]. This draws attention to the role of local authorities and the influence of broader local governance dynamics on the potential of urban food governance mechanisms to convene connected local food systems beyond participatory processes [24]. However, there is still a research gap in understanding of the dynamics between local governance contexts, urban food governance mechanisms, and local food systems. In particular, there seems to be a lack of attention in the literature to how the role and approach of local authorities affect the internal dynamics of local food systems, eventually affecting their sustainability outcomes [30]. This study addressed this research gap by analysing the role of local authorities and the dynamics of urban food governance mechanisms in the articulation of local food systems in two cities (Preston, England and Vitoria-Gasteiz, Basque Country).

To do so, we use urban political ecology (UPE) as a theoretical framework. Although not widely employed in the context of urban food governance and local food systems, UPE has the capacity to shed light on the winners and losers of particular socio-ecological configurations in the context of local food policy [31]. This is particularly important to the study of local food systems and their external influences due to the usual lack of focus on power and inequalities in urban food governance literature [24] and local food system processes. UPE utilises two main concepts to examine these dynamics: urban metabolism and circulation. Urban metabolism refers to the flows of the material, natural, discursive, and social elements within cities constructed through appropriation, exchange, and transformation that form specific urban configurations and relations [32]. The concept of circulation contends that the ways in which these metabolic processes are constructed and mobilised (politically, socially, and economically) to serve particular purposes creates beneficial conditions for some and detrimental conditions for others [32,33]. UPE situates these dynamics in a direct relationship with—and thus explores the influences of—larger regional, national, and global systems [34]. In such a way, UPE conceptualises local food systems as socio-ecological constructions, built through the metabolism and circulation of material, natural, and social elements between those who constitute and those who can affect these processes, such as local authorities. Using this framework, the study shows how diverse governance dynamics at the city level, particularly the role of local authorities

by setting specific policy priorities and allocating resources, influence the direction of local food systems and thus the alignment of diverse local food initiatives.

## 2. Methodology

The study draws on two contrasting case studies from Vitoria-Gasteiz, in the Basque Country, and Preston, in England. The two cases were purposively selected to ensure they would yield insightful information pertaining to the links between local food systems, urban food governance mechanisms, and broader governance processes. This conforms with Flyvbjerg's [35] description of maximum variation cases, which means selecting cases based on their difference in one dimension. The socio-institutional and political environment of local food systems was chosen as the differential dimension given the importance of governance dynamics, as explained above. In Preston, there is a prioritisation of economic development using a community wealth-building strategy in the context of austerity and economic and social deprivation [36]. In contrast, Vitoria-Gasteiz is one of the wealthiest cities in Spain with a strong focus on developing a green economy, including agroecological food systems, demonstrated by the creation of an urban food strategy in 2016 [37]. The specific socio-ecological dynamics of each food system and in-depth explanation of their socio-institutional and political contexts will be further addressed in the introduction to each case study.

Data collection methods included: document analysis, online semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. Data collection was undertaken from September to December 2020 in Preston and from March to July 2021 in Vitoria-Gasteiz. Table 1 provides information about the number of interviews, observations, and documents used in each place.

**Table 1.** Data collected.

Data	Preston	Vitoria-Gasteiz
Semi-structured interviews	30	28
Local food initiatives	21	17
Other organisations (research institutes, local authorities, and universities)	4	7
Local food experts	5	4
Documents	8	11
Participant observation	4	2

Interviews aimed to obtain in-depth descriptions and interpretations of the dynamics of local food systems from the participants' perspectives. Interviews were semi-structured, as this allows for a guided and interactive exploration by combining structure with flexibility [38]. Due to restrictions imposed to address the coronavirus pandemic, interviews were conducted online [39]. Purposive sampling was used to identify and select potential interviewees, deliberately selecting participants based on their relevance to help address the research purpose [40,41]. In this regard, local food initiatives were selected based on their potential to provide information about the dynamics of the local food systems. Furthermore, to obtain more insight into both cases, interviews with local food experts and stakeholders from influential organisations, such as local authorities and universities, in each local food system were conducted. Local food experts were people who were especially knowledgeable about the cases and were willing to share their knowledge [41]. These participants provided a general overview of the local food systems and their drivers through their experience and expertise.

Participant observation was also undertaken during fieldwork in order to contrast information about the dynamics of local food systems with the conducted interviews [42]. Opportunities for participant observation were purposively selected based on their relevance to the purpose of the research. Due to the restrictions related to the coronavirus pandemic, participant observation in Preston was conducted remotely in virtual spaces that had been set up by participants. Given looser restrictions at the time of data collection in

Vitoria-Gasteiz, participant observation was undertaken in person. In total, four meetings were attended in Preston. These included three meetings of a local food partnership, which includes local food initiatives and several public organisations, such as the City Council and County Council, and one meeting of a local food poverty network facilitated by the City Council. In Vitoria-Gasteiz, participant observation was undertaken in two collective events. One was organised by a public body belonging to the Basque Government to foster technological innovation in agriculture. The other event was a social mobilisation organised by local food initiatives to protest against a regional project that aimed to install a private macro tomato greenhouse.

Document analysis was used both as a precursor to data collection to provide information about the cases and a complementary method to enhance the findings [43]. Included documents were provided by participants or found online and gave information about the presence and development of urban food strategies and collaborations between local initiatives and public institutions in each city. Selected documents encompassed agreements, meeting minutes, annual reports, collective position papers, specific policies related to the construction of sustainable food systems, and evaluation reports of collective projects. Many of these documents were developed years prior to the research. Following Stake's [44] guidelines for case study research, these documents were used as "substitutes for records of activity that the researcher could not observe directly" and helped understand the stage and direction of each case in constructing interconnected local food systems.

Each case was analysed separately with patterns of similarity or difference between the cases explored subsequently [45]. Within-case analysis followed Braun and Clarke's [46] approach to thematic analysis to identify, analyse, and report themes within the collected data and draw out their implications for the research. Cross-case analysis included an adaptation of Braun and Clarke's [46] approach to thematic analysis to identify the lessons learnt from each case that contribute to deepening knowledge about local food systems.

The following results section is divided into two parts, one for each case study. Each part starts with a background of the socio-institutional and food system components of each case and then provides two main themes derived from the within-case thematic analysis. The discussion then provides the cross-case comparison to discuss how the characteristics and approaches used in urban food governance affect the direction and outcomes of local food systems. Throughout the process, UPE was used as a critical framework for the analysis. As such, the analysis focused on how the metabolism and circulation of material, natural, and social elements affected the construction of local food systems, with particular emphasis on the role of urban food governance mechanisms and broader governance dynamics in this process.

### 3. Results

The within-case analysis identified two fundamental themes in each case that help unpack the dynamics between local food systems, urban food governance tools, and broader governance processes. Each of these themes reflects insights gained from the cases in relation to how the construction of specific policies and processes in cities can affect the dynamics of local food systems, illustrated through discussion of their corresponding urban metabolism and subsequent circulation of metabolic processes. Before engaging with the details of each theme, a contextual description of each city and its food system is presented.

#### 3.1. Preston

##### 3.1.1. Contextualising Preston's Local Food System

Preston, the administrative centre of Lancashire, currently sits within the 20% most deprived local authority areas in England [47]. Preston's politico-administrative organisation conforms to a two-tier local government system—Preston City Council (PCC) and Lancashire County Council (LCC). The two councils are under different political party control and hold different responsibilities—PCC follows a more progressive agenda, and its powers



and services include planning, housing, environmental health, and leisure and culture. Significantly, a new approach to economic development focusing on community wealth building—often referred to as the ‘Preston Model’—has been introduced by PCC [36]. The ‘Preston Model’ mainly focuses on promoting the local economy through localist procurement and capital investment, worker cooperatives, and municipal ownership [48]. Across these components lies the crucial role of anchor institutions. Anchor institutions are local organisations with considerable purchasing power given their size, large supply chains, and substantial workforce.

Although this approach has helped improve economic indicators [49], the city still suffers from health and social deprivation. Life expectancy is lower than the English average [50], obesity and cardiovascular disease are a pressing concern [50], and food insecurity due to entrenched inequalities is rising [51–53]. This was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic as increased economic hardship broadened people’s vulnerabilities to food insecurity and hunger [54,55]. As in other cities in the UK facing complex socio-economic problems, a key priority of the city has been tackling food poverty by improving food access [56]. Given the cuts to public spending influenced by welfare reforms in the last 10 years [57], much of the responsibility for addressing these issues lies within partnerships between charities and community-based organisations and PCC, albeit with a limited capacity to address them. These partnerships have led to the development of Holiday Hunger Markets to provide surplus food for a small fee to families in need without any specific eligibility criteria [58]. Today, Holiday Hunger Markets are widespread, offering this service throughout the year with the support of PCC. Other civil society initiatives in the city include community gardens, which are mainly organised under a local network of environmental projects.

The food production system in Preston and its surroundings conforms to the agricultural landscape of Lancashire, which is mainly cultivated in an intensive manner [59]. Compared to other parts of Lancashire, Preston has a relatively low number of farmed rural hinterlands, mainly concentrating on livestock, arable, and cereal crops [59]. As food policy in England is highly centralised, local authorities have little influence on food production systems. Other cities have surpassed this barrier through innovative urban food governance mechanisms, such as urban food strategies or multi-stakeholder platforms in the context of the Sustainable Food Places network in the UK [60,61], for the development of sustainable food systems. However, PCC has yet to develop local policies that support these processes successfully. The following themes engage with how this lack of explicit focus on food system transformation has shaped the city’s local food system.

### 3.1.2. Bottom-Up Prioritisation of Hunger: The Focus of Preston City Council

Interviews with PCC participants highlighted that the political priority of the City Council in terms of food mainly relates to food poverty, understood as the inability to economically access food. This is exemplified through the development of metabolic processes that mobilise funding, information, and staff resources to facilitate community groups to self-manage food poverty schemes, such as Holiday Hunger Markets. As the only current department engaging with food issues is community engagement, the implemented approach relies on ensuring that actions are driven by community groups:

*“It’s the community groups that are influencing the policies, so we will always do it the other way around [ . . . ] We are there to listen what their needs are and what their issues are [ . . . ] so there is always that grass-roots level first, listening to the needs of the communities, what the issues are, and then using that really to shape any future policies going forward”. (PCC)*

This quote evokes a sentiment of circulating metabolic processes for the bottom-up development of local food systems through the active involvement of communities. In this context, PCC has mobilised efforts to create a food poverty network, an informal multi-stakeholder platform to coordinate strategies across organisations working on food poverty by distributing surplus and food donations. From the perspective of PCC, although this

is a public initiative, the idea is that the participating organisations take ownership of the network and thus determine its function while maintaining an acceptance of diverse aims and visions. Indeed, the opportunity to take part in one of its joint meetings showcased a desire to share experiences and resources within this space, with PCC facilitating this process. PCC's motivation to ensure that the food poverty network builds collective realities is translated into circulating tools to enhance the work of local food initiatives, with members being able to feed back on those tools and discuss their different approaches to food poverty. Participants expressed that the network's success lies in it not being led by one organisation advocating for a particular model, but by PCC through a horizontal and open approach. Interviewees highlighted the network as a relevant tool in facilitating collaboration and sharing across the local food system, leading to a feeling of working towards a common purpose.

Participants explained that local or sustainable food integration is not necessarily considered. For interviewees, the main reason for prioritising food poverty while sidelining other food system issues has been the broader political-economic austerity and welfare reform within the UK. Indeed, interviews with previous PCC officers revealed that austerity measures deeply reduced the capacity of PCC, with many previous efforts, such as the development of an urban food strategy, being left behind. In this context, although recognising the importance of sustainable food systems, PCC conceptualises itself as having only a marginal part in their development. It usually refers to local food initiatives as more essential players in driving the sustainability agenda. This is exemplified by the limited availability of public initiatives related to food other than the Holiday Hunger Markets or community gardens; there is no active public involvement in creating metabolic processes that include local growers or try to scale up local food initiatives working on sustainability in Preston. Significantly, some PCC participants commented that PCC does not procure food for its activities and, thus, there is no 'real executive interest' in engaging with sustainable food systems through the current community wealth-building strategy, showing a disconnection of the Council's current policy agenda from food. The coronavirus pandemic further accentuated this lack of focus on sustainable food systems by the City Council as food insecurity became more prominent issue in the UK. However, a reflection of how sustainable food systems could be integrated into addressing the issue of food insecurity was not considered in PCC's response to the crisis. The following section explains how this focus affects the internal dynamics of Preston's local food system through the uneven circulation of resources.

### 3.1.3. The Uneven Circulation of Resources through a Siloed Focus

The influence of PCC on the local food system comes in many guises and is particularly derived from the focus on food poverty explained earlier. Relevant metabolic processes include informal support, e.g., providing retail spaces or volunteers, and formal support in the form of funding or material resources. A key example is the facilitation of a food poverty network and the ongoing support of the Community Engagement Department for the establishment of new local food initiatives focusing on food poverty. As many of the local food initiatives working in Preston are either charities or community-based organisations, they are heavily reliant on funding and resources available in the city. Because of the creation of this institutional supportive environment for addressing food poverty through food redistribution, most local food initiatives working in Preston have the primary aim of hunger relief, capitalising on the resources made available by PCC. As such, PCC was constantly mentioned as an important player in the provision of resources and creation of interconnected local food systems. However, whether it provides an enabling or disabling urban metabolism for local food systems is contested.

Many participants regarded PCC's work as crucial in building collaborations across the local food system. However, other local food initiatives, mainly those working on promoting sustainable food systems, stated that PCC was not really going beyond its mandatory requirements with regard to food. According to one participant, PCC is reluctant



to go beyond their current focus on food poverty, which is influenced by the inability of PCC to recognise the expertise of local food initiatives on the ground. Indeed, in pursuing a specific agenda and thus supporting some local food initiatives more than others, PCC arguably creates an uneven circulation of resources that inevitably influences the dynamics of the local food system.

*“I think because [we] quite often rely on funding you are going into the same pots of money as other people that you might work with and uhm, so, are kind of continuously in competition with them”.* (Local food initiative 1)

This sense of competition was regarded by participants as one of the main barriers to collaboration, which is accentuated by allocating most of the institutional effort towards food poverty. Significantly, the circulation of public resources towards just one goal has affected the interconnections within the local food system, missing opportunities for the cross-fertilisation of ideas. For example, after strongly advocating for a change in PCC’s political priority in relation to food, the most vocal local food initiative for food relocalisation decided to disengage from the Council and avoid working with the food poverty network.

### 3.2. Vitoria-Gasteiz

#### 3.2.1. Contextualising Vitoria-Gasteiz’s Local Food System

Vitoria-Gasteiz, situated in the province of Álava, is the de facto capital of the Basque Country, which holds a relatively high economic and political autonomy, in particular relative independence in tax, fiscal, and civil law, compared to other Autonomous Communities in Spain [62]. Vitoria-Gasteiz has low unemployment and is considered one of the most affluent cities in Spain [63]. It has one of the largest industrial areas in the north of Spain, where factories like Mercedes-Benz have a crucial role in economic development [64]. Life expectancy is 84.29 years, which is above the European average [65]. Despite the relatively affluent state of Vitoria-Gasteiz, 7.7% of people were in a situation of serious material deprivation and 12% in a condition of relative poverty in 2020 [66].

Vitoria-Gasteiz’s politico-administrative system conforms to a one-tier local government system—Vitoria-Gasteiz City council (VCC), which sits under the control of Álava’s Provincial Council (APC). The main function of the Provincial Council is to collect and manage the taxes of the region. VCC shares responsibilities with APC for social services and holds competencies for urban planning, leisure and culture, and housing. Both administrations are under the same political control and have focus on territorial economic development. In particular, VCC follows a robust environmental, health, and social approach to urban planning, accompanied by several income and social benefits at the regional level [66]. The city’s commitment to sustainability is exemplified through the Environmental Studies Centre (CEA), a public autonomous municipal body that has promoted a green peri-urban infrastructure and organic community gardens around the city [64]. These efforts have led the city to be awarded the titles of European Green Capital in 2012 and Global Green City Award in 2019.

Vitoria-Gasteiz is one of the signing cities of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP)—a voluntary international commitment that provides a guiding governance framework for cities to drive change in food systems [67]. Similar to other European cities that have signed the MUFPP, particularly in Spain, a prominent goal is to promote sustainable consumption and production [68,69]. In this context, recent years have also seen the city support urban agriculture and local and traditional food consumption through contractual agreements with diverse local food initiatives. In Vitoria-Gasteiz, this focus on sustainable food in policies could be related to the rural hinterland of the city and region, which is made up of 40% farmland mainly dedicated to cereal, beet, vineyards, and potatoes [70]. The food system is organised through a cooperative model and focus on industrialisation, priorities supported by the Provincial Farmers Union (UAGA), the Basque Government, and Álava’s Regional Council [71,72]. In this context, many local food initiatives focus on promoting artisanal, local, and traditional small-scale production and localised consumption. In addition, there are several civil society initiatives that aim

to foster food relocalisation, such as organic self-managed community gardens. The following themes explore how the approach by VCC to promote sustainable food systems through its different policies affects the articulation of interconnected local food systems and their potentials.

### 3.2.2. Food Relocalisation and Participation: The Case of Vitoria-Gasteiz's Urban Food Strategy

A key urban food governance mechanism to comply with the MUFPP is the city's municipal plan towards a sustainable food system. This plan was developed following the creation of a joint manifesto by local food initiatives that called for urgent public action to introduce food in the political agenda in 2013. The result of this process was the acceptance of VCC to develop an urban food strategy, focusing mainly on relocalising food supply chains, through a participatory process led by the Environmental Studies Centre (CEA) in 2014. Interviews with participating local food initiatives highlighted that this development was proof of the commitment of VCC and CEA to foster horizontal spaces of policymaking:

*"[ ... ] it was very enriching, because you came down to the reality of saying 'well, the world works like this, we have this, these are the agents, this is the reality we have, now let's see how we fit the pieces to move forward to what that initial Manifesto marked' [ ... ] to me it seemed to be a model of how other participatory processes should be done". (Local food expert 4)*

However, when discussing the specific focus of the urban food strategy, participants suggested that the CEA and participating local food initiatives were biased towards ecological concerns, and that food access and poverty were not necessarily considered in the vision of the city, thus failing to invite local food initiatives working on these subjects to join the process. Nevertheless, given its focus on co-development and debate, the process of developing the strategy still led to discussions around food poverty as an essential concern:

*"[ ... ] but it was eventually included and with a certain importance, right? Food poverty was in the top ten objectives [ ... ] if the collective process had continued and because our idea was to also continue prioritising the identified objectives, it would have led to include more organisations in the future". (Local food initiative 2)*

This draws attention to the role of local authorities in creating metabolic processes that broaden the directions of local food systems through urban food governance mechanisms if specific participatory values and continuous reflection are fostered. In particular, interviewees highlighted that the participatory process led to the development of an informal network of organisations within the local food system and helped build synergies between a diversity of perspectives. However, after the acceptance of the final draft of the strategy by all those involved in the process, there was a rupture between VCC and local food initiatives, negatively affecting previous favourable metabolic processes for integrated local food systems, as will be further explained in Section 3.2.3.

### 3.2.3. The Contested Metabolism of Top-Down Projects

Although there was a general feeling within VCC that the urban food strategy process showed a public commitment to the development of sustainable food systems, local food initiatives had a certain scepticism about the degree to which food was actually raised as a priority in the public agenda as a result. There was a sentiment that there was no clear commitment to actually implement the more structural actions that had previously been agreed upon. Significantly, for many local food initiatives, the municipal plan did not reflect the actions that were agreed upon during the development of the urban food strategy:

*"[ ... ] of all the ideas and everything that was developed, the municipal plan, practically 80% of what was allocated was for cement, to build. That is, 'we are going to do agroecology, but first we are going to fix a building and we are going to continue building' It's weird... And in fact, the building is still there, nothing has been done [ ... ]". (Local producer)*

This relates to the different expectations of the outcome of the participatory process between local food initiatives and VCC, which affects the outcomes of the metabolic processes derived from urban food governance mechanisms. The document analysis helped identify that VCC framed its role as developing an action plan—a specific document—within their competencies based on the urban food strategy. On the other hand, local food initiatives viewed the outcome as the creation of a collaborative space, whereby actions would be developed and conducted jointly:

*“What we saw was the process, it seemed super interesting to us to be able to talk to each other and design actions little by little and coordinate and develop short-, but also see long-term goals [ . . . ] We did not understand it as to develop a plan and then each to their own”. (Consumer cooperative)*

This mismatch in expectations led to several tensions once the municipal plan started to be implemented. Several organisations wrote a collective response to the urban food strategy to voice their feeling of being co-opted and ‘used’ by VCC. Participants signalled that these dynamics led to a burn-out within civil society, decreasing the interconnectivity of the local food system, and thus contributing to a break in metabolic processes that promote sustainable food systems. Significantly, the informal network formed because of the participatory process gradually decreased its diversity due to their limited capacity in convening meetings and the disappointment of some organisations.

For some interviewees, one of the main reasons for these conflicting results relates to how public institutions develop projects or policies without really changing values within the public infrastructure. The urban metabolism derived from this then creates conditions where resources are circulated for implementing projects that do not meet the realities or objectives of those that eventually benefit from them—local food initiatives, farmers, and civil society—such as in the case of the urban food strategy. Although participants from the public authority felt that, indeed, coproduction in policymaking is needed, they also felt that increasing participation, for example, in the municipal plan implementation, could lead to civil society placing all responsibility for change on public institutions. Eventually, this created a disenchantment and mistrust between public institutions and local food initiatives, missing opportunities to successfully implement urban food governance mechanisms. For example, although there had been recent talks to restructure the municipal plan with increased participation of civil society, local food initiatives were reluctant to believe that this would be any different than the first time.

#### 4. Discussion

This study set out to assess the intersections between local political contexts, urban food governance, and local food systems using UPE as a theoretical framework. In doing so, we show that the dynamics of local food system governance—influenced by the broader political and economic contexts that condition the approaches taken by local authorities—are a critical determinant in convening integrated local food systems. This means that, in order to understand the construction and character of local food systems, attention needs to be paid to the influence of broader governance dynamics and the role of local authorities beyond the creation spaces for the interactions of local food initiatives [24]. Indeed, as exemplified in Preston’s case, the priorities set out in the local public agenda follow contested multilevel governance processes. As previous studies have shown in the UK, broader political-economic austerity and welfare reform can reduce the capacity of councils to engage beyond their legal requirements and thus limit their transformative capacity, highlighting an uneven balance between national and local power in policymaking [73]. In contrast to Preston, Vitoria-Gasteiz is a relatively affluent city with a long-standing commitment to sustainability and social welfare. In particular, compared to other cities in Spain and the UK that struggle to implement food policies at the local level due to a lack of legal powers and competencies [28,73–75], changes in Vitoria-Gasteiz are more easily translated into practice due to the greater degree of political and economic autonomy of the Basque Country. This means that there is more potential to circulate resources to promote

collective policy change, such as in the case of developing the urban food strategy. This argument draws attention to the importance of resource availability and political capacity when framing the work of local authorities in the creation of metabolic processes that promote sustainable food systems [23].

Nonetheless, the wider political context in Preston provides a contrasting set of metabolic processes that deserves broader attention for understanding the role of local authorities in developing and promoting interconnected local food systems. The fact that PCC is actively and successfully enacting the 'Preston Model' signals that local authorities can search for creative ways to address relevant local concerns despite challenging circumstances. Nevertheless, promoting sustainable food systems is not a consideration in Preston as a means to help meet the Council's objectives of community wealth building and inclusive growth, which is problematic. The community wealth-building approach could be used to steer the work of local food initiatives beyond a focus on food poverty and towards supporting sustainable food systems without needing a huge investment. For example, the Council currently aims to influence anchor institutions to include certain criteria in their procurement strategies to advantage local businesses. This approach could also include sustainability criteria so that resources are circulated to scale up the efforts of the small number of local food initiatives working to promote sustainable food systems. Thus, the relevant question is not whether local authorities can promote local food systems that promote sustainability but what the underlying reasons are for not circulating resources for this purpose. The issue then becomes a matter of prioritisation and highlights a lack of political imagination, hence questioning whether the focus on austerity politics is the only reason for not engaging in more transformative change. Indeed, other cities in the UK facing high social and spatial inequalities and similar resource constraints due to austerity reform are engaging in the development of sustainable food systems [56]. As such, while the place-based interrelations of local political contexts and broader governance dynamics should be considered in the analysis of local food systems, this does not necessitate an uncritical reading of the conditions created by these processes.

Previous research has demonstrated that creating informal deliberation spaces based on a particular aim can increase trust within local food systems if supported by local authorities [27]. However, seen in other cities in the UK and Europe, even if there is a commitment to integrate a systemic approach to food systems change, there is still a tendency to prioritise some issues over others, depending on local political and socio-economic conditions [31,75,76]. For example, cities with consolidated agroecological movements tend to focus on promoting short food supply chains and organic food [75,77]. Significantly, Preston's case exemplifies that the ways in which local authorities circulate resources through a siloed approach derived from this prioritisation (in this case food poverty without a wider focus on sustainability) can benefit some local food initiatives and not others, eventually helping form links between certain local food initiatives. As demonstrated, local food initiatives, or networks of initiatives, that align with PCC's policy agenda or that are 'recognised' organisations receive the most support, marginalising those that do not meet these criteria. This supports the argument that, while connections with influential players help leverage resources, not all local food initiatives are equally able to navigate these structures due to an uneven positioning within the local food system [17]. As shown in Section 3.1.2, this can lead to disconnection and competition within local food systems due to the subsequent unequal circulation of resources and eventually miss opportunities to collectively meet sustainability concerns.

This study therefore highlights the need to look beyond existing relationships within established collective spaces and towards the potential effects of metabolic processes that increased support by local authorities could have in developing more sustainable and interconnected local food systems. In this sense, this study's findings support previous research that argues that the need for policy instruments that establish closer socio-cultural connections between actors in local food systems and bringing a system-based perspective of food-related concerns through urban food governance mechanisms [18,76]. As shown

through the case studies, the advancement of specific policy priorities and subsequent urban food governance mechanisms create metabolic processes that influence the relationships within local food systems. Notably, the approaches taken in this context affect the overall direction of local food systems through the circulation of metabolic processes that serve a particular agenda, potentially leading to a focus on only certain aspects of sustainability. The intricate mix of power choreographies that shape local food systems means that even though urban food governance mechanisms, such as urban food strategies or informal multi-stakeholder networks, can help bridge disconnections between local food initiatives and foster spaces of discussion, their implementation influences the long-term assemblage of local food systems and their sustainability potential.

Despite these concerns, the two cases illustrate the importance of public institutions in facilitating metabolic processes that foster the collectivisation of change towards more transformative actions. Preston's case demonstrates that a community-led approach to implementing collective food projects can positively affect the dynamics of local food systems. However, a vital concern here is its operative and informal focus, where no formal commitment is present and immediate actions are prioritised. Previous scholars have argued for the importance of ensuring continuity for urban food governance processes to be successful and impactful beyond pilot projects [29,78]. In Preston, the informality of the food poverty network is a significant drawback. It can easily be dissolved, halting any future development of more integrated and structural solutions. As seen in Vitoria-Gasteiz's case, creating institutionalised urban food governance mechanisms can help broaden the perspectives currently present in local food systems. The opportunity to debate and discuss beyond practical strategies, even between those who are like-minded, can still lead to a reformulation of the most pressing problems in a city, creating a new urban metabolism for local food systems. This illustrates that the capacity of urban food governance mechanisms to prompt the reflective ability of local food systems for sustainability and, as a result, creates more inclusive relations [20,79]. However, this study argues that the role of local authorities in institutionalising collective change within local food systems is more complex, especially if the implementation of these processes is considered.

Vitoria-Gasteiz's case illustrates that institutionalisation per se is not enough to ensure ongoing transformation; its success depends on the approach taken as it can create unfavourable metabolic processes for collective change. Institutionalisation can foster the development of reflexive spaces within local food systems and thus build interconnections between local food initiatives for more systemic change [56]. Nevertheless, this does not signify that a commitment to participatory values will be translated into the implementation of actions [80]. This study illustrates how formally established decision-making methodologies based on co-production can fail to create empowering spaces of collective action within local food systems [81,82] compared to bottom-up spaces where local food initiatives take ownership. Indeed, Vitoria-Gasteiz's case demonstrates that the interconnectivity of local food systems formed through participatory policymaking can be dismantled if the governing culture prioritises the creation of specific projects and limits the voices of local food initiatives. As Guthman [83] illustrates, the focus on relocalising food systems in policy spaces does not always imply adherence to the goals of local food initiatives. In other words, regarding a process as 'participatory' does not mean that a top-down approach is not present in which the aims of local authorities are prioritised, and the roles of civil society remain consultative [29]. Therefore, looking at the development of strategies or policies is not enough to ascertain if the institutionalisation of collective processes contributes to building cohesive local food systems; politics—the decision-making dynamics—should also be considered. This means paying attention to who is included in urban food governance processes and their implementation and on what terms and conditions. What should the role of local authorities be in the construction of local food systems that build a more sustainable future, given their possible biases against constructing a long-term process for change?



As explained above, the foci of local authorities, including participation, reflect complex place-based and multi-scalar urban metabolisms of the locations of local food systems [24]. Therefore, the capacity of city councils to enact transformative processes derive from “the regulatory support, decision-making mechanisms, and human capacity available” [23] (p. 40). For example, Preston’s socio-economic status of deprivation and austerity policies have played a part in the city’s food poverty prioritisation, disregarding the development of sustainable food systems. In Vitoria-Gasteiz, the economic development of multilevel policies clashes with sustainability priorities and has affected the follow-up implementation of the city’s food strategy. However, regardless of place-based metabolic processes, a common failure of in both cities has been the inability to integrate sustainability principles that merge social, economic, and environmental concerns. This is at odds with previous studies asserting that local authorities are best placed to lead collective change due to their systemic perspective on food issues [23,25,26]. Without an all-encompassing inclusion of sustainability as a key pillar of urban food governance mechanisms, there might be a risk of a siloed focus in policymaking and thus also in the overall direction of local food systems, missing opportunities to direct metabolic processes towards supporting the development of sustainable food systems.

In this context, local authorities should not be the only stakeholder organisations responsible for changing metabolic processes towards the collectivisation of change. Responsibility should be shared collectively between public and civil society alliances. This means that local authorities should foster the development of transparent, fair, and reciprocal spaces with a clear set of agreed common rules that aim to include sustainable principles in the strategies advanced (top-down) [13,84]. At the same time, specific mechanisms should be developed to allow local food initiatives to take ownership of co-constructing policy and engage in their own terms (bottom-up) to instill trust across local food systems and expand the perspectives currently involved in policymaking [85]. This could be done by including specific measures in urban food governance mechanisms that facilitate and strengthen the city’s social fabric and relations between local food initiatives alongside allocating resources for partnership development and direct participation, as seen in other cities [86,87]. As seen here, this process would require a radical transformation of the dominant institutional paradigms and metabolic processes of governance spaces to maintain critical participatory values once city councils formally commit to institutionalising collective food processes.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper presents an analysis of how different approaches to local governance, including urban food governance mechanisms and related metabolic processes, shape local food systems using Preston in England and Vitoria-Gasteiz in the Basque Country as case studies. Notably, the study draws attention to the complexity and ambiguity of multi-stakeholder governance processes that emanate from different modes of governing and capacity building in local food policymaking.

An important contribution of this study has been identifying specific characteristics of urban food governance, particularly the role adopted by local authorities, that lead to specific outcomes in local food systems and thus local food initiative dynamics. Preston’s case highlights that a challenging multilevel policy context and local landscape can affect local authorities’ capacity to promote collective policy change. Nevertheless, in this context, there are still opportunities to collectivise efforts through community-led informal processes. When this bottom-up approach is adopted, the dynamics of those local food initiatives involved can be positively affected if there is consideration of building horizontal relations and accepting diversity. Nevertheless, disregarding critical aspects of food system transformation—sustainable food in the case of Preston—and thus prioritising certain local food initiatives more than others can lead to competition within local food systems through the uneven circulation of resources. In addition, the informality of such processes without ongoing funding or resources risks endangering the continuity of collective change. In this regard, the case of Vitoria-Gasteiz shows the importance of institutionalising collective

efforts and the availability of resources to do so. Participatory policymaking, as in the case of urban food strategies, can create metabolic processes that positively affect network building and expand discourses and perspectives within local food systems—even if there is an initial bias towards a particular focus. Nonetheless, using a top-down approach to implement the results of this process, even if resources are available, can dismantle the advances in building integrated local food systems.

The research findings also highlight that there is still much to unpack to fully understand the dynamics between local political contexts, urban food governance mechanisms, and local food systems to identify the pathways towards collective food system change. A crucial insight that derives from the comparison of cases is that distinguishing between bottom-up or top-down approaches advanced in cities through local policymaking and urban food governance is not as clear-cut as previously conceived. UPE helps identify more clearly which approaches are beneficial due to its focus on the circulation of resources (material, discursive, social) within local food systems and the urban metabolism that derives from these processes. Using such a framework helped to identify how, in Preston, despite using a community-led approach (bottom-up), the allocation of resources for a specific public policy agenda has a direct effect on the dynamics of the *local food system*, and more importantly, on the overall focus taken by its components (*local food initiatives*). In this sense, although it could be regarded as a bottom-up approach due to certain local food initiatives taking ownership of the process, top-down mechanisms are still at play. At the same time, in Vitoria-Gasteiz, the urban food strategy process started through horizontal participation and coproduction (bottom-up) but ended in the circulation of resources towards top-down projects gathered in the municipal plan.

The very nature of local food systems is then filled by intricate entanglements of fluid interconnected relations and governance dynamics in which visible and invisible power struggles challenge attempts to build collaborative transformative networks that promote sustainable food systems. This study has helped unpack these dynamics through the selected case studies. However, it also raises the need for greater comparative research that has an analytical focus on the influence of local authorities in convening interconnected local food systems by paying particular attention to power dynamics.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualisation, T.Z.; methodology, T.Z.; formal analysis, T.Z.; investigation, T.Z.; writing—original draft preparation, T.Z.; writing—review and editing, M.A., M.D. and U.P.; supervision, M.A., M.D. and U.P.; project administration, M.A.; funding acquisition, M.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was conducted as part of a doctoral research project funded by the University Alliance DTA3 under the DTA3/COFUND Marie Skłodowska-Curie PhD Fellowship (<https://unialliance.ac.uk/dta/cofund/> (accessed on 20 August 2022)).

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by Ethics Committee of the University of Central Lancashire (protocol code BAHSS2 0069 Stage 1 approved in May 2020 and Stage 2 approved in January 2021).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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