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Accelerating regional food systems change:

Lessons from a FixOurFood knowledge exchange event

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This report was prepared as part of the FixOurFood research programme, led by the University of York and funded by the Transforming UK Food Systems Strategic Priorities Fund.

FixOurFood aims to understand and build pathways to more regenerative food systems in the Yorkshire and Humber region. For more information, please visit: fixourfood.org. FixOurFood is funded by the Transforming UK Food Systems Strategic Priorities Fund (BB/ V004581/1).

The International Knowledge Exchange event was organised by the Centre for Food Policy, City St George's, University of London. The Centre for Food Policy is an interdisciplinary research centre dedicated to informing policy and practice to redesign food systems to be fair, healthy, sustainable and resilient. For more information please visit: <https://blogs.city.ac.uk/foodpolicy/>

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Summary

In October 2025, FixOurFood and the Centre for Food Policy, City St George's, University of London, hosted an international knowledge exchange event to explore opportunities to strengthen and accelerate regional food systems change.

Our aim was to share and learn across diverse organisations navigating regional food policy and practice in different contexts.

The event highlighted the opportunities and challenges of taking more regional approaches to developing and implementing regional (sub-national) food policy and wider food systems change.

Key takeaways

- The importance of place-based knowledge and experience cannot be overestimated.
- There are vibrant ecosystems of non-governmental organisations working at the regional level within and between countries.
- There is a need to carefully and critically “craft our skills” and build capacities for regional food systems change.
- There is a need to unlearn as much as there is to learn.
- There is a need to celebrate progress as well as achievements.

Introduction

The so called ‘missing middle’ between the local and national is an opportunity and a challenge for efforts to develop fairer and more sustainable food systems. Around the world, we see rising engagement with city-regions, functional urban areas, food territories and devolution frameworks as different ways to think about food systems transformation beyond the local level in ways that are sensitive to place. We use the term, ‘regional’, to describe place-based food systems that operate at a scale between the local and the national. Yet regions can be difficult to define; multiple conceptions of regions co-exist and vary significantly within and between countries. Regions, then, represent a challenge for public policymaking. Despite the emergence of dedicated networks of organisations working from the local to the global levels, regions represent an under-examined site of food systems change.

We begin from the idea that international knowledge exchange can play a key role in strengthening place-based approaches to food systems change. On 29th and 30th October 2025, the Centre for Food Policy, City St George’s, University of London and the FixOurFood research programme held a two-day knowledge exchange event. The aim of the event was to share and reflect on diverse experiences of driving food systems change at a regional (sub-national) level; to convene leading thinkers and practitioners working on similar issues in different contexts.

Organisations represented by current or former staff members at the knowledge exchange event

From the UK: Sustainable Food Places, Nourish Scotland, Our Food Trust, Shropshire Good Food Partnership, North Yorkshire Council, Good Food Leicestershire, Food Sense Wales, FixOurFood.

International organisations: RUAF, Food Secure Canada, Ghent Food Policy Council, Alimentar Cidades Sustentáveis (Portugal), Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), Bruges Food Lab, Let’s Food Cities (France), EStà (Italy), and Stuttgart Food Policy Council.

This event builds on five years of regional food systems research and action by the FixOurFood research programme, led by the University of York, in the Yorkshire and Humber region of the UK. Our aim was to bring this experience into dialogue with diverse food systems initiatives from around the world to identify key practical lessons and opportunities for enhancing regional food systems change.

The event was structured around three themes:

- **Regional food policy and governance** – what does effective regional food policy look like?
- **Structures for change** – what organisational and network structures are effective for food systems change?
- **Ways of working** – how are different organisations working with government agencies, civil society and the private sector to effect regional food systems change?

This report is structured around key themes that emerged across discussions over the two days. Our hope is that this summary contains insights that might be useful for academic, practitioner, and policy-making organisations working to drive food systems change at a regional level.

When is the idea of regions useful?

We considered: when is it useful to think about food policy at the regional level? When is it more helpful to focus on the local or national level? What are the challenges and opportunities related to working at a regional level?

Key learnings included:

The regional level has strategic potential for food policy and food systems change. The regional level can be an effective level for catalysing and scaling local level initiatives. Place-based regions are a particularly useful scale for building and coordinating cross-sector networks, as well as for ensuring coherence across approaches at different scales—local and regional—and for strengthening rural-urban linkages. The regional level may also present opportunities to draw on novel funding mechanisms that are not available at other levels.

Different levels of governance can play complementary roles in driving food systems change. While the national level can play a key role in financing, enabling, and monitoring food systems change, the regional level can be effective for connecting and amplifying action and innovations from the local level. Regional government and governmental agencies can also play a key connecting role between general national-level policy and local contexts; supporting the strategic alignment of activities and objectives between local and national levels of public policy.

Some food policy issues may even be best managed at the regional level. These include public procurement, food loss and waste management, and the integrated management of land, food and water systems. A bioregional approach¹, for example, may be well-suited to a regional level; an area not defined by political or jurisdictional boundaries, but rather by its natural characteristics. However, these issues are strongly context dependent and require the integrated management of agriculture and climate change. Crucially, food systems challenges and our responses to them vary significantly across contexts and scales. For example, decisions regarding school food procurement are made at different levels in different countries. For example, under mandate of National Government Department of Education in some countries and under the mandate of the city (local) government in others.

¹A bioregion's boundary is defined as being ecologically and culturally defined, contributing to aspects such as regional self-reliance, responsible environmental action and connection to place. See: Berg, P., 1978. Reinhabiting a Separate Country: A Bioregional Anthology of Northern California, Planet Drum Foundation.

When is the idea of regions useful?

Challenges of working at a regional level include the difficulty of reconciling multiple conceptions of regions: the concept of bioregions, for example, often does not correspond to administrative boundaries.

There is generally a lack of capacity and resourcing available for working at a regional scale. This is compounded by the fact that across many countries, there is a relative institutional gap at the regional level, populated by a smaller number of organisations and public agencies working to effect food systems change.

There is significant variation in regional governance structures dealing with food policy within and between countries. Participants identified a diversity of governance structures and other legal bodies that make and implement regional food policy in different places. This variation corresponds with significant variations between regions within countries over economic inequalities, diverse histories, and biophysical contexts.

In some contexts, regions play an important role in food systems change as part of a multi-level approach, where actors engage with the opportunities that come from the regional level in combination with strategic action targeted at the local and national levels.

This is not to overemphasise the potential of the regional level. Rather it is to critically engage with the opportunities that come from the regional level in combination with strategic action targeted at the local and national levels. A national framework that supports local and regional action was suggested as a pathway forward, where each level can reinforce the others.

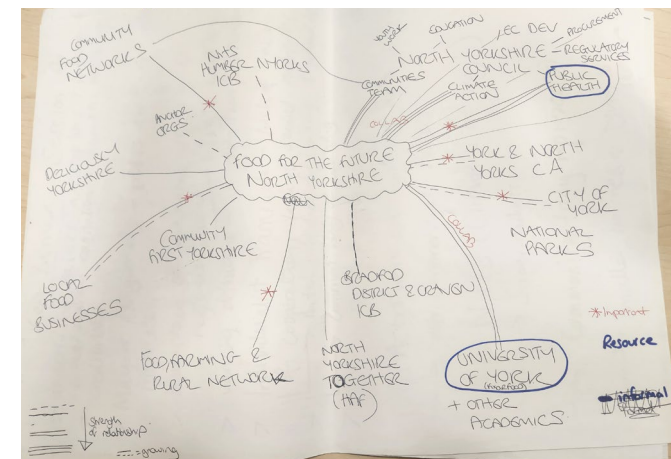
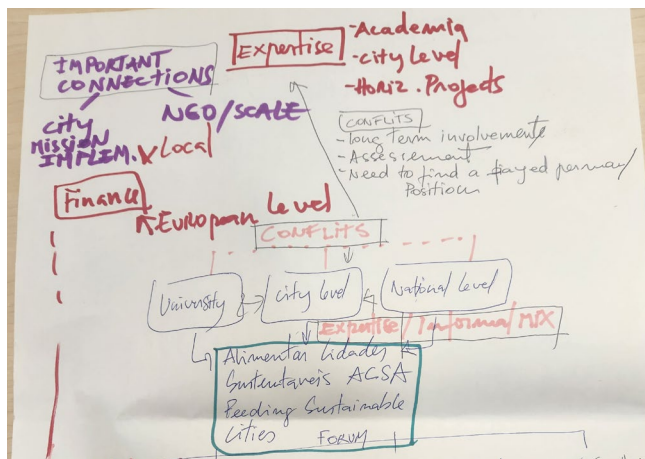
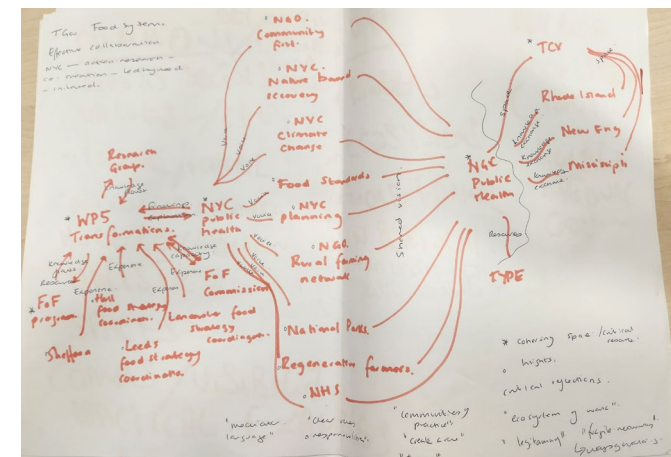
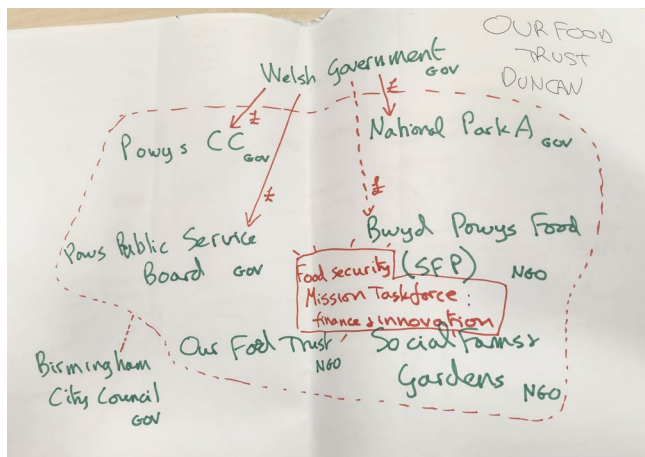
Regional food policy structures and networks

Mission Taskforce :
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Participants drew the network of organisations that they work with in their region, producing a wide variety of network maps.

Drawing on these maps, participants explored the nature of the networks, focusing on the types of connections between the organisations: which are formal or informal connections; which are collaborations, conflicts, or contacts; and where are the resource flows – finance, expertise, people?

We also reflected on why some networks and connections are particularly effective.



Regional food policy structures and networks

Key learnings included:

It is vital to build and maintain networks and relationships built upon shared values. Trust is key to a functioning network, as well as working with organisations that bring complementary knowledge and skills. Mediators and convenors that have the skills and capacity to support the network can play a key role here. Regional food systems work is doubtless pressing and important, but regional food network building can also be enjoyable and fun.

Building effective regional networks can take many years of work, although the timeframe can be shortened where trust, credibility and relationships have already been established – especially for cross-sector relationships. Taking the time to build strong personal relationships with ‘champions’ and ‘people who get it’ at different levels of government can be particularly important to enhance communication and political support. These champions can play a key role in connecting and leveraging large regional networks and ‘connecting the dots’ across diverse actors.

Effective relationships can both be formal and informal. Being open to both increases opportunities and network resilience – where “if one [approach] doesn’t work, another might get there”. However, it is important to highlight some often-invisible issues that need to be managed within regional food policy networks, such as potentially unequal distribution of resources and risk amongst organisations, as different organisations may have different degrees of access to policymakers and resources.

Effective regional food policy networks must be designed for each place. There is not one model that works everywhere.

Additionally, participants reflected on some further common characteristics of successful organisational networks including:

- being a values- and purpose- driven network
- care and mutual support within networks
- continuous learning and development
- an ability to play multiple roles
- shared language
- thinking and acting across sectors
- practice and providing practical examples of food systems change
- a culture of convening, bringing together, and ‘connecting the dots’

Regional food policy structures and networks

Organisations face a range of challenges to network building at the regional level that vary significantly with context. Cultural, economic, and political differences, amongst others, variously enable and constrain what approaches can be taken to build regional capacity.

There are risks and opportunities tied to regional food partnerships being embedded within or working closely with governments, when work can depend upon contingent political support. Equally, there are risks associated with being entirely independent of government, such as a reliance on fixed-term project funding and difficulty in building relationships with policymakers.

There is a need to shift from short-term towards long-term thinking and institution building. For example, to access funding mechanisms and to build on knowledge over time. When describing local food partnerships in the UK, one participant noted that, "We're really careful not to call our partnerships 'projects'".

Additional barriers to building and maintaining effective regional food policy networks included:

- Resource challenges and a reliance on competitive funding applications
- Difficulties in engaging with the private sector
- Competition for resources, space, and access amongst organisations that otherwise share aims and values
- The impact of electoral cycles on the visibility of food systems issues
- The lack of explicit food systems policy mandates within regional authorities.

Fairness and participation in regional food policy

Following a presentation on work by FixOurFood to enhance participation and inclusion in a local food policy process in Sheffield, UK, we considered: who is participating in the development and implementation of regional food policy and who is benefiting from regional food policy?

Key learnings included:

Those not currently benefiting from regional food policy are typically under-represented in its development and improvement. There is an imperative to embed participation and inclusion within any regional food systems policy or initiative. Without doing so, any food policy initiative risks reproducing existing inequalities. Relatedly, there is recognition that there are cultural differences in public administration between countries; in some countries, inclusive and participatory processes are encouraged, while in others they are not commonplace. Reflecting on an experience with Food Secure Canada, one participant recounted how organisers were challenged by First Nation groups to recognise ongoing injustices and power imbalances within food policy processes.

Diversity within cities and regions should be celebrated and protected. Rather than strive for a 'one-size fits all' model, we should embrace heterogeneity and diversity within and between regions. Relatedly, such approaches must also engage with intersectionality, recognising the need to avoid reducing people to single categories – farmer, parent, migrant, etc. – in regional food policy development.

Some groups have been harder to engage in regional collaborations than others. For a diversity of reasons, consumer groups, those experiencing food insecurity, farmers, supermarkets, and other large-scale private sector actors are typically under-represented. This limits our capacity to understand opportunities and challenges across food systems and to develop systemic responses.

There also exist context-dependent challenges regarding understanding of issues such as rural food poverty, which may be less visible and less well documented than in urban contexts.

Developing more inclusive approaches to regional food policymaking demands unlearning how we currently work at the same time as developing new approaches. Food and regional food systems hold different places within different cultural worldviews. Beyond the need to protect diverse worldviews and cosmologies within policy processes, there is a need to critically reflect on our own assumptions and biases in relation to how others view the world. The reality of embracing and learning through difference can be uncomfortable, challenging and destabilising, but can ultimately lead to new ways of working, thinking, and collaborating to effect food systems change.

It is vital that we try to understand structural and practical barriers to participation. This is a systemic issue. But it is also a practical one. For example, economic pressures, working environments, and caring responsibilities often mean that individuals and organisations do not have capacity to commit to additional regional food initiatives, where it also important to clearly define the purpose and scope of participation to prevent participation fatigue. There is a tendency for governments and other organisations to invite participants into processes that have already been formulated, which risks falling into tokenism rather than inclusion. Practically, the onus must always be on policymakers and other organisations to travel to the spaces that people already meet and work and to meet them where they are; as one participant noted, "don't expect them to come to you!"

Organisations such as Food Matters in the UK are taking an active approach to enhancing inclusion through leading the Sustainable Food Places' Race, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (REDI) programme, which has developed toolkits and listening events that seek to increase the participation of underrepresented groups including farmers, economically disadvantaged groups, young people, black and minority ethnic groups and refugees.



Looking forward

We discussed: What more do you want to do in your region and what resources do you need to make this happen? In other words, as a diverse group of practitioner and academic organisations, what is our collective ask for accelerating regional food systems change?

Key learnings included:

Governments and funders should provide resources for horizontal network building, thereby increasing capacity across sectors for more joined up approaches to regional food policymaking and implementation. This represents a challenge for organisations in every sector but is particularly problematic in governmental organisations. Towards this goal, there is a need to build food systems understanding at higher authority level (e.g. devolved or mayoral combined authorities), as proper representation of the size of the task with respect to food systems is often not well understood and can play second fiddle to economic development concerns. There is also an opportunity to harness the devolution agenda in the UK, where it is possible to build on the progress of local authorities, recognising that regional governance arrangements vary significantly between national contexts.

Leaders of large-scale research and action

programmes such as FixOurFood must consolidate their legacy. Such projects have built considerable capacity for regional food systems change, which must be brought to bear on regional food policy going forward. Building this legacy requires resourcing, as well as a considered approach to organisational and network governance going forward.

Government officials and other stakeholders should develop approaches to data and financial management and regulatory compliance, amongst other things, that are needed to push regional food systems approaches into the mainstream. Targeted technical expertise could support the acceleration of food systems initiatives.

Further suggestions included:

- Convenors of food partnerships might shift towards more collective and systemic approaches for regional food systems change, recognising that no single organisation can drive change alone, thereby increasing resilience across organisations working at this level.
- Policymakers need to recognise that local and regional food partnerships and food policy councils are an essential infrastructure to drive food systems change that should have a statutory basis and long-term funding options.
- Researchers and regional food systems practitioners need to develop greater understanding of the diversity of effective approaches to regional food policy processes internationally.

- Researchers and regional food systems practitioners need to develop new ways of recording, measuring, and evaluating the impact of regional food policy networks and diverse organisations including food partnerships, NGOs, and community-based organisations, who do lots of unrecognised and invisible work to enhance the accessibility of healthy and sustainable food.
- Regional food systems practitioners need to be aware of the dangers of co-option and green-washing, whereby progressive ideas lose their transformative potential as they become more widely adopted and even serve to prop up the status quo.
- Researchers and regional food systems practitioners need to raise awareness of food systems issues amongst shoppers and consumers.
- Researchers and regional food systems practitioners need to better understand 'the how' of operating across scales: what are the most effective ways of aligning ambitions and collaborating across the local, regional, and national levels?
- Researchers and regional food systems practitioners need to embed systems thinking across food education, communications and advocacy.
- Regional food systems practitioners or food partnership convenors need to build upon and harness existing networks, relationships and capacities rather than start from scratch.

Summary of key themes and learning

In the final session, participants were asked to share a key learning from the event.

Key learnings included:

1. The importance of place-based knowledge and experience cannot be overestimated.

While there is a continuous need to obtain and carefully manage limited resources, it is vital that the strengths and capacities of organisations, such as their practical experience, must be recognised and leveraged. However, the time and labour needed to build and maintain regional networks is often not accounted for in project planning or funding.

2. There exists a vibrant ecosystem of non-governmental organisations working at the regional level within and between countries.

As one participant suggested, all the organisational network maps produced by participants could be connected to one another. These networks are resilient, but in some respects, they are also fragile, dependent on key individuals and relationships that need to be supported. The challenge is to transition towards a network/ecosystem that is more collaborative than competitive.

3. There is a need to carefully and critically “craft our skills” and build capacities for regional food systems change.

Each nested level of the food system brings with it new opportunities and challenges and it is important not to assume that what works locally or nationally, or even internationally, will necessarily be effective at the regional scale. Learning and developing in one place can be accelerated by learning across experiences and differences – such as by visiting and speaking with organisations doing similar work and with similar values in different contexts. Key here is the need to develop an ability to work across multiple strategic frames and spatial scales, from the local to the global.

4. There is a need to *unlearn* as much as there is to learn.

Recognising the limitations and politics embedded within existing ways of working can be challenging. And it is difficult to carve out critical and reflective space for unlearning in busy schedules. There is value in taking a moment to reflect upon, and make visible, our assumptions and presuppositions about how regional food systems operate and how regional food systems change happens, in order to build new, impactful, and inclusive ways of working.

5. Celebrate progress as well as achievements.

We need to recognise the vital work being undertaken at the local and regional level across Europe and to celebrate the inherent value of efforts to make food systems fairer and more sustainable. Approaches such as action research are ways to better document and acknowledge important progress in each place.

Conclusions



The FixOurFood Knowledge Exchange event reaffirmed our belief that regional approaches to food policy and food systems governance have a critical role to play in transitions towards fairer, healthier, and more sustainable food systems.

We recognise the need to build new capacities, relationships, and new ways of working to effectively build and strengthen regional food systems. We also recognise the challenge and the opportunity that comes with operating in heterogeneous and rapidly changing sub-national policy environments, where a regional food systems work is more likely to be effective where it is supported by a legislative framework which mandates a regional approach to food policy.

We hope to continue sharing knowledge and experience, building impactful relationships, and ultimately creating the conditions for new approaches to regional food policy. Think and act in your regions, because that is where place-based food systems change can, and must, happen.