



15 May 2019  
 ICLEI European Secretariat  
 Deliverable 7.5

## Stakeholder Dialogue Breakfast Summary Report

# Fostering the Circular Food Economy Through Stronger Rural-Urban Linkages

On the sunny morning of 11 April 2019, a diverse group of practitioners, policy makers, researchers and civil society representatives met in Brussels to share experiences and ideas for a better European food system. The event was co-hosted by the ICLEI European Secretariat and the Flemish Land Agency on behalf of the [H2020 ROBUST project](#) using the well-established Breakfast @ Sustainability's format. The purpose of the event was to convene a variety of topic experts and Brussels-region stakeholders to inform the ROBUST research agenda at the EU level. This event focused on sustainable food systems and strengthening rural-urban linkages.

This event was graphically recorded. The final full-sized illustration can be viewed and downloaded from the Rural-Urban website [here](#).

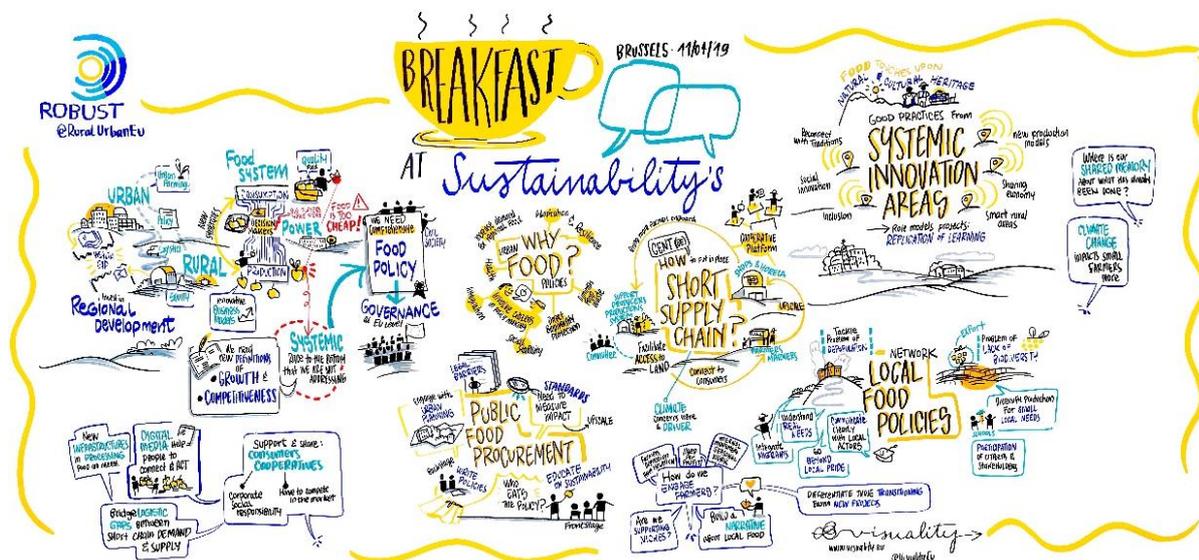


Figure 1 Final graphic illustration of the event (Visuality)

The event started with a warm welcome by the organisers and a short introduction by **Paul Van Der Sluys** about the Flemish Land Agency and its approach to supporting rural-urban sustainable food systems. The program began with keynote talks by **Alexia Rouby** (DG-AGRI) and **Peter Schmidt** (European Economic and Social Committee), who presented the current food system in Europe and

some inspirational examples of new ways to approach the challenges and opportunities through policies and practice.

In the second half of the program, **Prof. Han Wiskerke** (ROBUST Project Coordinator) led a panel of topic experts from Italy, Denmark, Germany, and Belgium in a discussion about how to strengthen rural-urban linkages to improve city-region synergies and sustainability, support rural economies, and promote a circular food economy.

### *The Keynotes*

**Alexia Rouby** set the stage for the discussions with a comprehensive overview of the most significant policies, processes, projects and guiding documents related to sustainable food systems and rural-urban synergies in Europe. She highlighted the importance of the RURBAN Partnership 2013, EXPO Milan 2015 and the CORK 2.0 DECLARATION 2016, which specifically acknowledged that rural and urban spaces have different but complimentary assets.

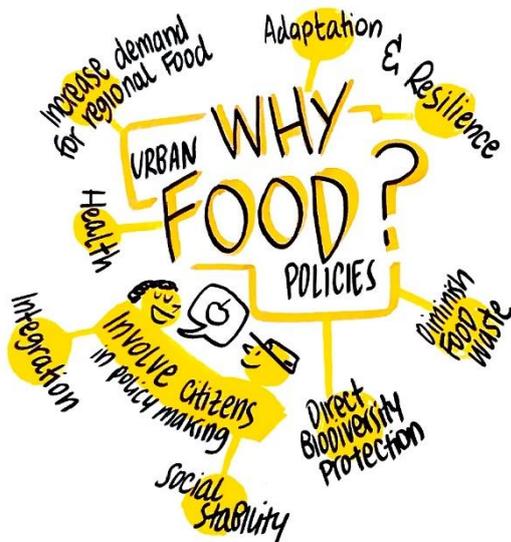
Ms. Rouby emphasised the need for more “trust” between producers and consumers and presented how this is being done in several EU projects. Some do this by rewarding farmers in various ways or by supporting procurement procedures. Others examined how Innovative Business Models could be created, such as ‘recreational farms’ in the Netherlands and rural micro-entrepreneurs in Estonia. (View and download Ms. Rouby’s “Rural Urban Synergies and Food” presentation [here](#).)

Building on the foundation introduced by Ms. Rouby, **Peter Schmidt** delivered an inspirational and passionate call for a Comprehensive European Food Policy. In his view, the food system is especially affected by unfair trade practices. He argued that the current food system is in a “race to the bottom”, where multinational food corporations generate substantial profits by neglecting the adverse environmental and socio-economic impacts of food production and processing. He believes that “food it too cheap” since it excludes fair prices for producers and the true cost of degrading the environment.

Mr. Schmidt argued that Europe is currently functioning in the context of “highly fragmented food policies” and advocates for a Comprehensive Food Policy and governing body (for example, DG-FOOD), which would integrate the existing sectoral policies and tackle challenges in an integrated way. In order to achieve this, he is involved in developing a Food Policy Council and promoting the idea of “sustainable compactness”, which is based on quality, not just quantity.

### *The Panel Discussions*

Prof. Wiskerke set the stage for the moderated expert panel by briefly summarizing the objectives of the ROBUST project and presenting each panellist with a specific question to start the dialogue. He started with, *“Cities have to deal with lots of issues such as social inequality and stability, safety, climate change, employment, mobility, and health. So why care about food as a municipal policymaker and even more so, why develop an urban or city-region food strategy or policy?”*



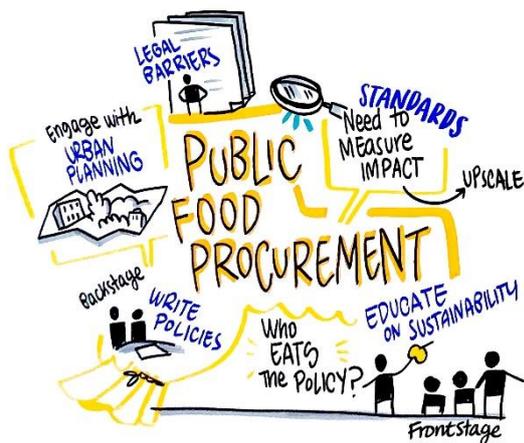
Urban food policies are not a new idea – they’re just coming back, argued **Stephanie Wunder** (Ecologic). Before globalization accelerated and significantly impacted the way food is produced, distributed and consumed by Europeans, every city had an urban food policy. She considers food to be a complex and intertwined system that needs to be addressed not only in traditional agricultural / rural contexts, but in urban ones as well. She highlighted eight areas where an integrated approach with food as a framework can help comprehensively address other sustainability challenges:

1. citizen participation
2. environment (biodiversity protection and closing the nutrient cycle)
3. food waste
4. climate resilience
5. food security
6. health (vis-à-vis food procurement and regulation)
7. social stability and connectedness; and
8. economy / local identity.

Ms. Wunder emphasized that developing regional food strategies is a win-win approach for those who are interested in building stronger urban-rural linkages, as well as those who are interested in building more sustainable food systems.



**Lieta Goethijn** (City of Ghent) shared how the city of Ghent focused its energy on cooperating with both producers and consumers to create a shorter, more transparent food chain. She gave inspiring examples of the city’s goal to shift from “should do” to “how to” as it implements its Urban Food Policy. In one of their recent projects, the city created a platform to connect producers with consumers through beneficial cooperation to better govern the supply of and demand for farmland in the peri-urban area of Ghent. In addition, Ghent is also setting up food hubs where (rural and peri-urban) food producers and urban food consumers can meet. An important but challenging issue in this process is securing land for local agriculture in areas with intense land development pressure.



Interesting work is also being done in Sweden and Denmark where **Prof. Bent Egberg Mikkelsen** argued that public procurement is a fundamental tool for driving a sustainable food system. He identified four challenges to developing short food supply chains for the public sector:

1. Coordinating different governmental levels in their procurement efforts;
2. making the urban food challenge “everybody’s project” and a shared responsibility;
3. addressing third party challenges to create smooth interfaces in public food;
4. and making food systems a task for the public food workforce.

He further illustrated the issues with a theatre analogy: “backstage” actions are important (i.e., creating good policies, engaging with spatial planners, addressing legal barriers, etc.), but “front stage” actions are also imperative – that is, consumer education. He believes that schools should create spaces where students meet, talk, and learn about Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and food sustainability, and that there is a need for a ‘multi-narrative’ in order to achieve this.

**Giampiero Mazzocchi** (Italian Food Policy Network) provided other examples of positive work related to food, economic development, and rural-urban linkages from Italy. He highlighted the stories of two villages in southern Italy who used the Food Policy development process to help address their most pressing issues: depopulation and monoculture.

Castel del Giudice (population 400) is an isolated village that has struggled with depopulation and economical marginalization despite its rich cultural landscape. Here, a Food Policy Council was slowly developed through dialogue and cooperation to valorise and scale the food system from a local to a provincial scale to stop depopulation and attract new families to the area. Through this process, the stakeholders realised they needed to work with other actors and neighbouring territories to achieve their goals. Using similar methods, the Tollo Food Strategy is trying to address challenges related to resiliency, like biodiversity loss and monoculture. (View and download Mr. Mazzocchi’s “Sustainable Economic Development and the Italian Food Network” presentation [here](#).)



Continuing with the observation of the rural space as a complex integrated landscape, **Simona Tondelli** (RURITAGE Project Coordinator) shared some interesting international examples of rural regeneration processes that include sustainable food systems and cultural heritage. The [H2020 RURITAGE project](#) establishes a new heritage-led rural regeneration paradigm that seeks to transform rural areas into sustainable development demonstration “laboratories”. RURITAGE is doing this by enhancing their unique Cultural and Natural Heritage potential. One interesting example is the Coffee Production in World Heritage Sites (Colombia) where food production is tackled in an integrated way and carefully takes local culture into account. (View and download Ms. Tondelli’s “Local Food Production to Boost Rural Regeneration” presentation [here](#).)



The above examples generated considerable reflection between the event participants with follow-up questions and comments about cooperatives, organic farming, access to land, “smart” integration and the role of ICT, immigration, CAP reform, and legal barriers to supporting local food systems. Several participants also brought up the aspect of the work force required (permanently or seasonal) in the food system. **Alexandru Matei** observed that there is a European phenomenon of seasonal worker migration where (subsistence) farmers from less developed regions leave their own farms to work on more developed industrial farms, thus reducing their own chances for developing and benefiting from their agricultural land. This is a complex phenomenon with systemic problems that needs to be addressed in relation to the Cohesion Policy of the EU.

Prof. Wiskerke concluded this fruitful discussion with global reflections on what he heard throughout the program. He observed that there is considerable knowledge and research on the topic of circular sustainable food systems, but there is a challenge on how to bring it into practice. He has the feeling that calls for similar research are emerging constantly, and wonders what happens with the results of completed research projects, as not all of it is touching the ground and being used in regions. He emphasized the need for better integration of knowledge from research with public policies and strategies.

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