State and communities in urban food governance: Lessons from COVID and insights for the future

Changing goal posts

When we submitted the proposal for this Special Issue (Food and Communities in post-COVID cities) at the beginning of 2021, the world was caught in a global crisis that was both a pandemic and an infodemic. Our knowledge of how the SARS-CoV-2 virus was spreading was mediated through different channels and various competing discourses of expertise. During this time, cities were perceived as 'super spreaders' due to population density and proximity, leading to various degrees of lockdown and movement restrictions in many countries. Our starting point was to unpack and analyse the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic (COVID-19 thereafter) would have had on food security for vulnerable urban groups. Hence, the main aim of the Special Issue was to invite scholars worldwide to discuss the implications of the pandemic on urban governance in the - food security - vulnerability - community-action nexus.

The on-set of COVID-19 challenges how cities and urban areas addressed food security, in particular for vulnerable groups conventionally. A crisis of this scale has exposed the fragility of urban food supply chains, which can be hampered by restricted mobility, lockdowns, social distancing, and rising prices. The impacts on livelihoods have also created new food vulnerabilities, which highlighted the poor resilience of urban areas to shocks or threats to food security (Béné, 2020: 1; O'Hara & Toussaint, 2021; Cohen, 2022). It raised the central questions for urban governance: who is/ should be responsible for food security and how urban food crises can be governed.

There is an urgent need for knowledge exchange regarding what lessons can be learned regarding how communities and the state had adapted to overcome food security challenges. This Special Issue is called to encourage contributions worldwide to produce in-depth case studies for knowledge sharing and better understanding of the strength and weaknesses of cities in their emergency responses and the implication for the future of urban governance. The background and framing of the special issue are as follows:

Understanding urban governance

Modern conceptualisations of urban governance diverge from a traditional focus on power hierarchy to an emphasis on the formulation and implementation of policy through dynamic lines of power and networks of actors inside and outside the government (Bulkeley & Kern, 2006). Rawls famously framed this moving 'from the government to gover-

nance' as network governance linking actors at various levels. At the same time, "cities and regions are increasingly expected to be more self-reliant and less dependent on central government support; and top-down hierarchical control is evolving into a division of labour between cities, regions, and central government" (Pierre, 2012, 104). Facilitated by globalisation, cities increasingly rely on transnational networks to increase their capacity to address challenges that can be mitigated more efficiently than just relying on local know-how and resources. Moreover, the "growing disjuncture between the increasing need for advanced knowledge and information, on the one hand, and the capacity of the local state to create and sustain such expertise, on the other hand" (Pierre, 2019, 106) has led cities to cooperate in a wide range of policy fields, including policies aimed at improving food access and food security - see for instance the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact which is an international agreement on urban food policy signed by over 200 cities from all over the world. The framework of multi-level multi-actor governance and networks offer cities an appealing whilst, collaborative arena to respond to challenges beyond 'the local'. The more transparently a city is organised and involved in political networks, the more likely it is to be involved in multi-level governance experiments (Peters and Pierre, 2012, 11). There is no need to say that the multi-level multi-actor governance framing has enabled cities to open up new transnational spaces to pursue policy learning, knowledge co-creation, and capacity building (Pierre, 2019, 103).

Institutions at the local level are important levers of urban politics and can hold local political authority (e.g., local authorities). They are also repositories of systems of rules, meanings, and beliefs, able to drive urban politics on a defined set of objectives. Therefore, cities' priorities and urban policies are influenced by the authority and system of norms arising from local institutions (Pierre, 2011, p16). With urban governance, new actors are involved in the decision-making process at the urban level, but their impact depends on the institutional framework which can act as a facilitator or a constraint. In particular, partnerships or informal networks made of third sector organisations represent new tools to enact cities 'capacity to act' at the local level; however, they can also challenge the authority of local institutions (Pierre, 2011, 16). This means that urban governance is based on "different models of public-private exchange and concerted resource mobilisation" (Pierre, 2011, 20) hence, more attention is given nowadays to policy-making processes in urban governance rather than to its formal institutions. Still, the institutional framing of urban governance remains important to understand "that structure matters; despite the influence of economic and societal actors on urban political decision-making, urban political institutions

remain the only effective linkage between the populace and elected officials" (Pierre, 2011, 23).

DiGaetano & Strom (2003) also developed an institutional model of urban governance based on public-private governing relations arising from the interactions between different institutional 'bases and modes of governance. Institutional bases represent the formal institutional arrangements (e.g., governmental bodies, agencies, political parties, interest groups, and partnerships) that provide a visible form of urban governance through rules and organisational structures. Modes of governance refer instead to "all those informal arrangements that define the governing relationships among and within formal institutions implicated in urban politics (DiGaetano & Strom, 2003, 363). Hence, one may expand some of these conceptualisations concerning the role of urban communities in food security. This is especially important in a post-COVID-19 world that seems to have relied on informal or semi-formal community action and civil society-public sector partnering to govern the health crisis locally.

Governing the urban food system

The peculiarities of the urban food system and its interaction with various areas of urban policy (e.g., spatial planning, social security, logistics, transport, health etc.) can explain why it is so difficult to develop urban institutions or policies that look holistically and effectively at the urban food system. Therefore, while it is difficult to identify a defined space for food policy at the urban level, urban food policy tends to unfold and develop its own 'space', which cuts across urban sectors and governance platforms involving public, private, and third-sector actors (Ilieva, 2016).

Food, as such, has not been, to date, a mainstream area of interest in urban politics, policy and governance studies. As Morgan (2009, 341) stated more than a decade ago, this "puzzling omission" is not justifiable anymore, given the multi-faceted character of the urban food system and its effects on different urban policy sectors. With the onset of health and natural disasters, "food cannot be wholly commodified" anymore (Morgan, 2020) and it is different from other market goods because it is an enabler of people's wellbeing. "Cities are emerging as key transition spaces where new food governance systems are being fashioned" (Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015: 1558) and where the role of the state and municipal government shifted from rowing to steering the delivery of public services (Halliday 2015:23). In response, urban food policy can take many forms, depending on context (Moragues et al., 2013: 2; Morgan, 2009). One such example is the urban food strategies which aim to change the discourse around the urban food system by placing food at the centre of the urban agenda and creating synergies with stakeholders across urban sectors such as public health, environmental policy, community development, local economy, retail , and waste management (Moragues et al., 2013). This is different from food policy councils, a related still different type of urban food policy, which indicates the organisational framework that directs food policymaking at the local level (Stierand, 2012; Sonnino & Spayde, 2014).

The 'urbanisation' of food policymaking replicates the urbanisation narrative: a more city-centric perspective should be adopted in the urban food system as most of the global population now lives in cities (Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015, 1560). This is complemented by an emerging focus on the role of urban agents, including civil society groups and food movements, in shaping the urban food landscape. Such agents tend to cooperate with local governments to fill a policy vacuum and rescale national food policymaking at the urban level (Sonnino, 2019, 14) - for example, in the US and UK, urban food policy often emerges from social movements coordinated by local governments (Stierand, 2012, p369). Moreover, participatory models of food governance enable coordination between different urban actors which is fundamental in the food policy realm (Sonnino, 2019). Civil society and non-governmental organisations are not only required to identify policy needs but are also important to successfully implementing policies.

Urban food has not traditionally been seen as a sector to be governed at the city level. Urban food policymaking and governance are the results of bottom-up and participative processes where the public, private and third sectors cross paths to address and/or prioritise food issues locally, highlight urban food needs and speak to the multifaceted character of the urban food system (Stierand, 2012). This has only grown in importance with COVID-19.

Cities, communities, and food

The interdependencies between cities, people, and food have not only been highlighted by COVID-19 but also surfaced throughout current debates on climate change, biodiversity loss or land degradation crises. Cities grow in both importance and population at a high rate, and so does the need to ensure food security in times of uncertainty. According to the UN, 60% of the global population is set to live in cities by 2030 (WFP, 2022), calling for a need for the food system to become more efficient and resilient in production, distribution, and consumption; moreover, the food needs to be healthy, available to all, meaningfully connected to local contexts and environmentally sound (Isendahl & Barthel, 2018; Kaiser et al., 2021; Lim, 2014). Some COVID-19 urban debates have already highlighted why cities can be problematic during pandemics: they assist transmission due to their population densities (the spread); they hinder response (physical distancing, lockdown), and they make it harder to return to normal due to their size and infrastructure (phasing); moreover, some urban areas are hit harder, such as the marginalised suburbs, which in turn impacts on the efficacy and efficiency of welfare provision (Florida et al., 2021). At the same time, cities are engines of economic growth, concentrate vital public services, and catalyse civic voice because of their numerous populations. People will not stop living in cities.

COVID-19 has had different impacts on access to food and food services for communities on the ground, especially vulnerable communities such as the elderly, people with disability, and low-income groups. With food supply shortages, restriction of movements across cities and country borders, and curtailment of physical interaction, COVID-19 has brought to the forefront the fragility of globalised and commercialised food chains (Batini et al., 2020). It has also completely reshaped the food system and "how people interact with their community food environment" (Haynes-Maslow et al., 2020). COVID-19 has rendered inequalities in access to healthy food even more visible when comparing different urban areas, neighbourhoods, and communities by affecting most low-income and ethnically diverse communities. The literature on community response to disaster is abundant and offers insights into how communities react to hardship. Communities are often unprepared, even in the wealthiest countries (Shannon, 2015). As a result, they require additional training (Newport & Jawahar, 2003), enhanced community activity (Newport & Jawahar, 2003), and networks of disaster relief (Day, 2014) to become resilient. Communities do not act in isolation and are wired to form a city's wider governance framework.

Food insecurity at the community level has been dealt with during COVID-19 via food banks or soup kitchens, on-street food supply, home-meal services by volunteers, and distribution of produce from allotments. Integrating community action and local government is key to good governance processes in cities, and collective action is seen as the gel that brings that together (Healey et al., 2002).

The papers included in this Special Issue are listed below. They bring to the light of the dismissible community- or local-based responses, new urban actors, and new spaces of urban food governance during COVID-19 across various cities, including London, New York, Stockholm, Seoul, Wuhan, Nanjing, Kuala Lumpur, and Fraser Valley Regional District and Greater Toronto Area and India. Two papers reflect on a larger (regional and national) scope. All papers in this special issue share a common theme that the resilience of the communities, strengthened by their ability to organise, improvise and innovate, has without exception played a pivotal role in addressing emergency situation. The state's role, how-

ever, can be different. Some states were more hands-on than others and some were more accommodating and supportive to community initiatives than others. Regardless of the nature of the political systems, when the actors shared the common goals to address the needs of the people and were willing to work together, the difficulties could be tackled well. It was often the case that there were no such agreements among the actors and sometimes some actors even held back the others. A further point is that agreement between the actors could break down at any stage of the crises and even a well-coordinated emergency response system could fall apart when fatigue and time factors kicked in. These papers contribute to the growing literature on the governance of food systems and crises responses in urban settings. They are briefly summarised below:

1. Catalina Turcu's and Martina Rotolo's article, "Disrupting from the Ground Up Community-led and Place-based Food Governance in London during COVID-19", examines the emergence of community-led and place-based governance mechanisms in London during COVID-19, disrupting existing governance frameworks and highlighting the need for more inclusive and people-focused approaches to urban food governance (Turcu & Rotolo, 2022).

2. Johan Nordensvärd's, Young-hwan Byun's, and Carl-Johan Sommar's article, "Urban Food Security during COVID-19: The Limits of Statutory Welfare and the Role of Community Action in Sweden and Korea", explores how community organisations in Stockholm and Seoul addressed COVID-19-related food insecurity, by complementing the existing statutory welfare, identifying hunger risks and organizing community initiatives, which indicates the crucial role they played as welfare providers (Nordensvärd et al., 2022).

3. Bingqin Li's, Jiwei Qian's, Juan Xu's and Yiran Li's paper, "Collaborative Governance in Emergencies: Community Food Supply in COVID-19 in Wuhan, China", investigates the Whole of Government-Whole of Society approach in addressing community food supply challenges throughout several stages of COVID-19 lockdown in Wuhan. The study highlights the interdependence of the government and the society during the lockdown and the importance of collaboration, with the government functioning as an open-minded coordinator and adopting a flexible governing structure to allow and support community actors to respond in their strength (Li et al., 2022).

4. Cohen's article titled: "Food crisis as a tool for social change: lessons from New York City's COVID-19 Response" shows that the pandemic caused major disruptions to New Yorkers' food practices in three ways. Vulnerable populations were hardest hit. The city introduced emergency measures to stave off food insecurity and hunger and there is also a refocusing of food governance to address social equity issues such as fears of engaging with food programs by immigrant communities, disparities in access to online grocers, worker rights and worker ownership, and new priorities for the use of public space. These policy responses illustrate how the crisis has opened opportunities for initiating changes that can lead to a more just food system (Cohen, 2022).

5. The paper "Governing for Food Security During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Wuhan and Nanjing, China" by Yi-Shin Chang, Zhenzhong Si, Jonathan Crush, Steffanie Scott, and Taiyang Zhong examine China's zero-COVID responses and impacts on urban food security, focusing on Wuhan and Nanjing. Different from paper 3 in this special issue, this paper examines a broader food system that goes beyond communities, which includes food production, transportation, pricing and purchasing. It highlighted the role of the state and made policy recommendations including consistent government action, strengthening food reserves, and improving access and utilisation at the household level (Chang et al., 2023).

6. Abdullah Khoso's article, "Pakistani Migrant Workers' Social Practices to Deal with Food Insecurity During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia", explores how Pakistani migrant workers in Kuala Lumpur coped with COVID-19-related food insecurity.

The findings show that social practices, such as communal cooking, sharing food, and social networks, helped migrants mitigate food insecurity, emphasizing the significance of social practices in promoting food security among marginalised communities (Khoso, 2023).

7. In their article, "Towards Equitable & Resilient Post-pandemic Urban Food Systems: the Role of Community-based Organisations", Jenelle Regnier-Davies, Sara Edge, Melanie Hoi Man Yu, Joe Nasr, Nicole Austin, Ashante Daley & Mustafa Koc examine the barriers, vulnerabilities, and opportunities perceived by community-based organisations responding to COVID-19 in the Greater Toronto Area. Findings highlight innovative initiatives and newfound support networks shifting towards community self-determination and the importance of these organisations in strengthening food system governance (Regnier-Davies et al., 2022).

8. Newell, Dring and Newman's article "Reflecting on COVID-19 for integrated perspectives on local and regional food systems vulnerabilities", studies vulnerabilities in local and regional food systems in the Fraser Valley Regional District in Canada. It used integrated planning perspectives and engaged local stakeholders to identify impacts and vulnerabilities in food systems. Findings showed complex vulnerabilities including inequities, lack of flexibility in institutional policies, and cascading effects. The research suggests that comprehensive-systems, regional, place-based, and temporal considerations can generate useful insights for local and regional resiliency planning (Newell et al., 2022).

9. Sankar Varma's and Rajib Sutradhar's paper, "Food and Communities in Post-COVID-19 Cities: The Case of India", argues that Covid-19 has disproportionately affected the urban poor in the Global South due to pervasive informal economies. India exemplifies this, with 81% of urban workers being informal. The pandemic has exposed India's food insecurity. The authors call for short- and long-term solutions, such as improving the portability of social protection for migrants or targeted redistribution for informal workers (Varma & Sutradhar, 2023).

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