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Beyond the Pyramid: Creating a Food Policy Council in Cork

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Introduction

While there is much pride in the way agricultural production in Ireland has grown over the past couple of decades, it remains somewhat paradoxical that the food system here remains a relatively neglected source of concern to many. To differentiate the food system from agriculture is to pay attention to the many different elements and activities that relate to the production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption of food (HLPE, 2017; Sage 2022a). In this respect it brings dietary practices – and their consequences – into sharper relief and asks questions about what different groups of people are eating and why. Invariably this causes us to recognise the existence of sharp social inequalities which are demonstrated not only by the types of foods consumed but by their consequences in dietary health terms. With rising levels of overweight and obesity, Type II diabetes and a range of cardio-vascular disease all tied to patterns of food consumption that are high in saturated fats, sugar and salt, there has been a gradual recognition amongst public health professionals to address the food system. Yet top-down messaging urging people to eat in line with the Food Pyramid, and to ensure they get their Five-a-Day has had limited success. Besides, such messages fail to acknowledge that individual decisions about what to eat are shaped by advertising, social norms and the pressures (time, money, commitments and responsibilities) of daily life.

Food systems, then, have come under increasing scrutiny and not only for their failure to deliver healthy nutritious diets. Despite the evident technological achievements of boosting productivity and dietary energy supply, almost one-third of the global population suffer from a degree of food insecurity while the contribution of agriculture to climate and ecological breakdown is widely recognised (Sage 2022b). Indeed, the complex and interconnected ways in which food systems can undermine human wellbeing (eg zoonotic spillover events such as Covid-19, antimicrobial resistance) demonstrates why a more holistic One Health approach to life on earth is becoming so necessary.

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'One Health' is an approach to designing and implementing programmes, policies, legislation and research in which multiple sectors communicate and work together to achieve better public health outcomes. The 'One Health' approach is critical to addressing health threats in the animal, human and environment interface'. WHO 2023

At a more local and regional level such concerns have been translated into a range of different initiatives: some driven by progressive municipalities pursuing a longer-term vision, and some emerging from bottom-up, civil society efforts. While such initiatives may have very varied goals, capabilities, degrees of public recognition and legitimacy, most demonstrate a desire to build a different kind of food system, one that is sustainable, healthier and more socially just. Moreover, a common feature of many is to claim engagement with food policy, thereby demonstrating a commitment to elaborate a more integrated and actionable programme of proposed change. While food policy councils first emerged in North America over 25 years ago, their spread across Europe, the UK and parts of the Majority World reveals how widespread is the interest in reshaping food systems at city-regional level for the benefit of local citizens. This chapter explores the development of Ireland's first Food Policy Council which was founded and launched in Cork City.

Background

The economic confidence of Cork has been influenced by our trading history as a city with an export driven food economy – we had the largest butter market in the world in the 19th Century and specialised in the production and exportation of cured beef all over the world. While Cork has long regarded itself as 'the food capital of Ireland', this claim has rather overshadowed the extent of food poverty and malconsumption across the city (Kenny and Sage 2019). While there have been a number of interventions to address these issues over the years, one of the more successful projects was a community food initiative (CFI) led by the Northside Community Health Initiative (NICHE) that began in 2010. Established in an area confronted by intersecting social challenges, the CFI generated a high level of local engagement and led to the establishment of a very successful community garden. Seeking to build on the action and good will of this project, during the summer of 2013 a public meeting to gauge interest in a city-wide sustainable food approach was convened by the three key players at this stage: the coordinator of Cork Healthy Cities, the Manager of NICHE who had managed the CFI, and an academic with an expertise in the food policy field. Given that the public response was so positive, a steering committee was assembled by invitation, principally to ensure representation from across the key sectors of the food system locally. Those who accepted the invitation to participate included representatives from the English Market, the

independent food service sector, Musgraves, social enterprise, farming, and civil society organisations. In addition to staff from the HSE, the City Council was also represented both by the Director of Environment and Recreation and by a member of the Planning Department.

The first task of this group was to agree on the formation of the CFPC, and then to create a 'food charter' elaborating five core values that would represent its aspirations. These were designed to be non-controversial but also illustrate the range of inter-connected issues that would be involved in achieving a healthy and sustainable food system for Cork [Figure 1: Food Charter]. With some limited financial support from Environment and Recreation Services at the City Council, work then proceeded to design a logo, a leaflet and establish a social network presence as a way of making the CFPC visible.

One of the cornerstones of the CFPC was – and remains - close collaboration with Cork Healthy Cities. The CFPC provided an active mechanism for supporting the WHO designation of Cork and the local authority as a Healthy City, and helped to bring about a commitment to a process and structure of working towards good urban health. The Healthy Cities approach is holistic in nature requiring 'One Health' joined-up thinking that places importance on inter-agency collaboration, dialogue, and action across sectors. Recognising the role of food consumption practices in shaping health outcomes, as well as the socio-economic inequalities that exist at community level, there was a natural synergy for Cork Healthy Cities to work alongside the emergent CFPC.

It was agreed by the Steering Committee that the public launch of the CFPC would be held over St Patrick's weekend, 2014, as a 'Feed the City' event. The centrepiece was the distribution of 5,000 bowls of curry cooked from one tonne of vegetables that were destined for landfill as surplus to retail requirements. However, besides the distribution of a free lunch – involving other items of perfectly good 'surplus' food donated by wholesalers – there was music performance, live cooking demonstrations and a variety of stalls providing seeds and composting information. Creating 'spectacle' is an important part of capturing the public imagination and offering ideas for alternative practices was critical and, indeed, has remained a vital part of the CFPC's programme. The event proved a huge success: there was a significant publicity impact with national and local television, radio and newspaper coverage on the event itself and on the reasons for creating the CFPC. The issue of food waste – and how we can play our part in reducing it – was a non-controversial topic and resonated widely with the general public attending the event. However, in a subsequent media interview the matter of fast-food outlets being located close to school gates was raised and this made a far bigger – if briefer – impact in the political realm. Local and national media coverage of this topic led to a response from the then Minister of Children that "the matter was being looked at" and

highlighted the potential window of opportunity for policy entrepreneurship at local level to raise an issue of wider national public interest.

Strategic and Creative Practices

Food Growing

From the very early stages of the CFPC, food growing became a strategic focus of interest as it provided an important and generally non-divisive way of bringing people together. One of the first documents that the Steering Committee prepared was a submission to Cork City Council as part of a public consultation exercise in advance of the 2015-21 Cork Development Plan. A number of recommendations were made in that submission, but the only one to survive intact was a call to increase the area of food growing space across the city. We believe that it has encouraged the City Council to make public green space more accessible for community food growing, as recent projects across the city would demonstrate. While this can be welcomed at an aesthetic level ('greening the city') it is also important to note the potentially subversive and emancipatory potential of food growing, which offers political agency to participants to contest, transform and re-signify the urban landscape. This is best illustrated by a public meeting held in March 2015 in Elizabeth Fort that was called largely to publicise the existence of the CFPC and invite ideas for activities. Around 80 people attended and in an entirely unanticipated way it quickly turned into a strategic planning event to identify and design planting activities in different parts of the city.

Over the following six or seven weeks a central axis crossing the historic core of the city witnessed the appearance of a large number of planter boxes filled with salad plants and the invitation to 'help yourself' – the Incredible Edible Todmorden model. These efforts of the CFPC in coordinating a guerrilla planting campaign revealed a widespread if buried enthusiasm for growing. It also encouraged Cork City Council to venture, cautiously, a little further with an emerging collaboration by offering the CFPC an abandoned open-air basketball court long shuttered as a consequence of anti-social behaviour. This site now hosts the Sustainable Food Lab, a growing space managed by a cooperative of around 25 people and which has served as something of a hub for a series of edible greening initiatives across the South Parish of the city.

With a robust and active steering group in place, investment from the Healthy Ireland fund was successfully sought to employ a part-time Coordinator for the CFPC in a shared role that would also coordinate the Green Spaces for Health initiative. This post has supported community food growing across the city for the last four years, with the Coordinator acting

as an honest broker in the negotiation of public green spaces, helping new and emerging community growing groups, and building capacity and understanding across the city about a sustainable and healthy food system for all. Details of the broad range of community food growing projects that have emerged from this process in Cork City can be seen in Chapter 11.

Box 1

The outstanding range of local Artisan producers in Cork is what makes it the food capital of Ireland. The English Market in the heart of the city houses fishmongers, butchers, cheese makers, bakeries, veg suppliers, and many artisanal foods suppliers. This indoor market and the Coal Quay farmers market, alongside the artisan producers in Cork, offer restaurants locally sourced, quality-driven, seasonal ingredients enabling chefs to be creative and resourceful in their cooking, adding variety to the restaurant menus. The close proximity of the producers to the city makes it easy for restaurants to buy directly from them, building solid reliable relationships that can last the lifetime of the business.

As a food business we are passionate about food and sustainability and have worked hard to implement many sustainable practices to create food businesses we are proud of. We endeavour to have zero waste, so what is not used in the restaurant will be used in the cafes, keeping a close eye on portion sizes that see empty plates return to the kitchen. We only use compostable packaging for our takeaway and corporate food orders which are delivered on our fleet of cargo bikes. We return packaging to the suppliers to reuse and compost all our prep food waste. We are constantly updating the equipment to be more energy efficient. We create menus with plant-based options, working with the seasons, and using locally sourced ingredients all of which appeal to a wider customer base.

Rising food and energy costs have made us all look at the business holistically. Reducing the unnecessary use of lighting, heating, kitchen equipment, and water is essential to remain in business. Employing the right team who share the same values and educating staff on sustainable practices is important for promoting a sustainable food system and reducing environmental impacts. These key staff shares their knowledge outside the workplace, influencing the behaviour of those at home.

Energy costs have risen considerably and it would be beneficial to have easily attainable grants made available to small businesses to encourage them to go green. Commercial waste contractors make little effort to encourage food businesses to manage waste properly. Brown bin pick-ups need to be more frequent and are expensive. I would like to see a three-tier bin system in the city centre to include a compost bin. Compostable packaging is used widely but not disposed of properly. City councils could do more to educate and encourage proper waste management within the city.

Marianne Delaney, Food Business Owner Cork City and steering group member CFPC 2013 - 2019

Sustainable and Healthy Food Events

From 2015 until the onset of COVID, the CFPC ran an annual Sustainable and Healthy Food Awards Scheme. The scheme is one based on acknowledging the efforts of the key players delivering sustainable and healthy food at local level by inviting actors in the Education, Community and Business sectors to propose and highlight their actions for acknowledgement and certification. Connecting these actions to the business and political structures in Cork

City, the Lord Mayor awards the applicants at a Civic Reception in the Council Chamber and the business sector provides financial prizes for those who are deemed to excel in each of the three categories. To date some 150 schools, colleges, businesses and community groups have received certificates.

The CFPC also organised an annual Food Harvest Festival, in partnership with Cork City Council, over a weekend in October. The objective of the event has been to showcase and celebrate community, public sector and businesses contributing to a sustainable and healthy food system in Cork. Participating organisations invite the public to witness their operation by opening their premises to visitors on the Saturday. The following day centres around activities in Fitzgerald's Park where stalls, talks, and workshops are accompanied by entertainment and free food prepared by volunteers from donated retail and community garden surpluses and donations. Again, the event serves to encourage conviviality around food, offering a sense of community while facilitating creative dialogue, the sharing of innovative practices and the sense of what systemic change might mean.

There have been a number of other activities in which the CFPC has played a role as facilitator. These have included support for the development of a food map for the city; a photographic competition and exhibition (in the Central Library); various workshops and seminars; cooking events with refugees and asylum seekers living in Cork and with restricted access to cooking facilities in the direct provision centres in which they reside. In 2019 a creative collaboration emerged with the Cork Midsummer Festival and a partnership was formed with the Chilean theatre group, Cocina Publica, during their week-long residence. In leading by example, members of the CFPC steering group have been personally and directly involved in the promotion and delivery of many activities that have sought to inspire and motivate people encouraging a rethinking of food and the current arrangements by which we eat (Giambartolomei et al. 2021).

Box 2

"When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist" - Hélder Câmara

Despite declining rates of both poverty and food poverty at the national level, food banks and other forms of food charity have increased exponentially in recent years. This growth can be attributed to the fallout from the economic crisis of 2008-10, the rise of corporate social responsibility efforts and an increasing awareness of the issue of food waste.

My research in this field (eg Kenny and Sage 2019) has demonstrated that the advent of FoodCloud – Ireland's first national food banking system - along with simplistic narratives have played key roles in

this growth and in normalizing and, indeed, celebrating the use of surplus food as a 'win-win' solution to food poverty and food waste. The COVID-19 pandemic has further cemented food banks as a solution to the structural issues of poverty and, in 2020, even MacDonalds, the world's largest fast-food chain, became a surplus food provider to Ireland's national food banking system.

A central factor contributing to poverty, and thus to food poverty, is low income which reduces the accessibility of healthier diets. Tastes are developed over time and require repeated exposures. For some low-income families, the risk of food waste associated with introducing new foods to children is unaffordable. Surplus food redistribution could minimise this risk, making otherwise less affordable food more accessible, however, if nutritional health concerns are considered outside the remit of charitable services, these arrangements can also reinforce existing dietary inequalities.

Evidence from my research in Cork suggests that there are tangible benefits stemming from making surplus food available to charities who then distribute this food to those relying on it to make ends meet. It has increased the availability of perishable foods flowing through the charitable food system and it does reduce the food bill of many receiving organisations. However, nutritional health concerns are considered to be outside the remit of most charitable food providers and the focus on reducing food waste leads to food, and often highly processed food, being distributed in response to food waste rather than food poverty.

Large volumes of baked goods, snack food, treats, and individually and heavily packaged food are a staple within surplus food streams and this contributes to keeping cheap, highly processed food the most accessible, or only option, for low-income communities. In this regard, there are questions around the role of food charity in reinforcing an already high health burden carried by those likely to be reliant on food charity. Moreover, food surplus redistribution falls into the food waste management rather than prevention category and despite efforts to redistribute as much surplus food as possible, food waste still occurs.

Efforts are ongoing to improve food environments elsewhere through healthy food policies in educational settings, workplace settings and hospitals, yet the charitable food environment - upon which thousands rely on a daily basis - remains outside the scope of this work. The growing role of the charitable sector as a key food waste reduction strategy means that surplus food redistribution is influencing the diets, the health, and food cultures of current and future generations. While these services cannot address the issue of poverty or food waste, nor should they be expected to, efforts can be made to ensure that the food banking system does not deepen Ireland's health inequalities or distract from the growing gap between the wealthy and the poor. Positive first steps in this regard would be the implementation of a healthy food policy for the charitable food sector along with stronger advocacy to remind people that food charity is only ever a band-aid response to a much deeper problem.

Dr. Tara Kenny, School of Public Health University College Cork

Food as a Lever for Health

We believe that a consequence of the Cork Food Policy Council's efforts to bring together a range of issues and perspectives related to the sustainability of the urban food system and thereby reconfigure conventional problem-framing has helped to produce a series of new place-based narratives. For example, the promotion of wellbeing through healthier diets has become more widely recognised as a public health issue in Cork and one around which to potentially build a persuasive narrative for change. The connection of food to health and wellbeing through the Cork Food Charter rendered it less divisive and overtly 'top-down'. With the successful experience of the initial community food initiative on the north-side of the city, there was legitimacy and credibility of such work in the eyes of individuals and grassroots organisations. From a Healthy Cities perspective, food is an ideal tool to bring people together and acts as a lever for change to the co-benefit of health and the environment.

A particular success has been to achieve 'buy-in', not just from local political representatives, but from key personnel in other sectors and agencies who may not have regarded health as a priority within their brief, but who have come to champion the Healthy City agenda. To create a narrative attuned to the social and political milieu of the time and place, different approaches have been interwoven by many actors. Pivotal in the enactment of this tactic was the role of the CFPC Chair, an academic with an appreciation for the multifaceted role of food. With a clear vision around the need to create institutions to drive and nudge systemic change towards sustainability, a cross pollination of ideas and transdisciplinary capacity was built across all of the stakeholders involved. This transdisciplinary approach has brought innovative thinking and action across sectors and has created opportunities to establish ground-breaking changes at local level such as the provision of public space for community food growing.

The CFPC experience underscores the importance of looking at policy entrepreneurship as a collective agency, one that builds on earlier as well as concurrent initiatives. The linkage of issues and concerns occurred together with the building of networks and connections of various actors (Giambartolomei et al 2021). The first activities of bonding and bridging across groups and individuals from different backgrounds stemmed from the collective effort of the initiators who reached out to individuals within their own very different networks and effectively allocated the initial seating at the table of the CFPC. It is important to recognise the influential role played by all stakeholders including representatives of the Cork Environmental Forum, the Local Agenda 21 organisation established in the mid-1990s, NICHE, and the food redistribution charity, 'Bia Food Initiative', among others. These organisations brought considerable experience and an extensive network of contacts with people from

across the city and with whom they had already built relations of trust. People who “wear many different hats” and who have a proven track record within the community are clearly most likely to play the role of policy entrepreneurs.

As noted earlier, in the early stages of establishing the CFPC steering committee, invitations to join were extended to two key staff at Cork City Council: the Director of Environment and Recreation Services and to a member of the Planning Department with a strong personal interest and identification with the goals of the CFPC. Yet the multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral aims of creating a sustainable healthy food policy is a challenge in the context of local government organisations generally hampered by siloed structures and bureaucratic municipal procedures. Cross-departmental, cross-disciplinary, and cross-sectorial collaboration creates multiple challenges and requires considerable investment of time and energy in re-imagining the possibilities for local policymaking.

Yet in 2022 Cork City Council approved the signing of the Glasgow Food and Climate Declaration by the Lord Mayor, upon the recommendation of the Environment Strategic Policy Committee, and commits Cork to putting into practice integrated food policies to tackle the climate emergency. The actions connected with this policy commitment will be agreed by the Cork Food Policy Council and will be embedded in the Cork City Local Economic and Community Plan 2023. Such international agreements can provide encouragement and support for deepening local efforts to achieving a more sustainable food system in Cork.

Conclusions

Cork Food Policy Council has been at the forefront of a number of practical interventions at local level:

1. The employment of a part time Coordinator through the national Healthy Ireland Fund
2. The development and support for community food growing projects and urban greening
3. An annual Sustainable Food Awards Scheme for the business, community and educational sectors
4. An annual Sustainable Food Harvest Festival
5. The development of the Cork Food Map to profile the food system in Cork to identify and address food-related issues affecting the people living in the region.

The Cork Food Policy Council has shown the importance of adding value to existing efforts by building relationships with key players in the food system and finding areas of mutual interest and benefit. The Cork Food Policy Council has successfully merged the public health and food sustainability agendas by identifying overlapping objectives and seizing opportunities for

action, building a credible reputation while simultaneously advocating for policy shifts at local, national and European level toward a sustainable and healthy food system for all.

In Cork, food has become a lever for health promotion, community development, community food growing and greening the city, promoting biodiversity and environmental sustainability. CFPC has enabled a process of defining the key challenges, linking the key issues and seeking opportunities for innovative good practice. Finance has been sought predominantly in the health domain but also at local authority level, to merge objectives and pool resources and the networks that have emerged in Cork have strengthened the role, credibility and visibility of the work. With investment in health at community level the national Sláintecare Healthy Community model fund will support the employment of a Community Nutrition Worker in the city. With the groundwork laid out to date by the CFPC and Green Spaces for Health the aspiration is that this role will complement the overall objectives of the CFPC and provide targeted support in the areas of the city in most need and with higher levels of food poverty. Efforts are also underway to develop a Food Innovation Hub in Cork City, a cooperative and commercial space that will facilitate growers to learn from each other, to supply healthy and organically grown food while contributing to a sustainable and viable local economy.

In the current global context of food shortages, increased food insecurity, rising food prices, the climate emergency, and rising public health anxieties associated with food consumption practices, local action becomes an indispensable imperative to positively influence the food system. Having laid a strong foundation in community food growing, Cork is now well placed to continue to challenge the prevailing model of food provisioning, offering alternatives and shedding light on sustainable and healthy ways forward in line with the One Health policy objectives of the WHO European Healthy Cities framework.

Generic Learning

- The success of the CFPC is credited to the broad commitment and membership of the steering group. All stakeholders brought considerable experience and an extensive network of contacts with whom they had already built relations of trust.

- People who “wear many different hats” and who have a proven track record within the community are clearly most likely to play the role of policy entrepreneurs.
- CFPC has demonstrated the need to balance policy with action to build credibility, visibility and impact at local level
- Food is a great lever for building health, community and environmental sustainability
- Collaborative action is essential for a sustainable and healthy local food system and is an evolving process, one shaped by robust and sometimes challenging relationships between statutory, voluntary, business, and community organisations.
- As policy entrepreneurs we have sought to navigate a path forward by drawing the actions outlined above: from defining problems and linking issues to recognising and creating windows of opportunity for sustainable and healthy food policy shifts.

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