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**TOWARDS A CRITICAL GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK:  
UNVEILING THE POLITICAL AND JUSTICE DIMENSIONS OF URBAN FOOD  
PARTNERSHIPS**

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Current governance configurations have been signalled as a key driver but also a potential solution to food insecurity and sustainability challenges. In this context, cities are becoming key transition spaces where new food governance systems are being fashioned, creating ‘spaces of deliberation’ that bring together civil society, private actors, and local governments. To date, food governance analyses have been mostly aligned with an optimistic philosophy that in many instances overlooks conflicts of interest, winners and losers of different arrangements, and institutional deadlocks. A critical account of these new governance mechanisms is particularly relevant to incorporate fully the political dimension inherent in the production of and access to food. By studying the emergence and functioning of eight food partnerships in the UK, this paper aims to advance in the conceptualisation and practice of a critical governance perspective. The paper combines three approaches in a new framework: political ecology, the post-political scholarship and participative justice. This innovative lens allows us to navigate how different partnerships mobilise notions of equality, participation and inclusion; co-produce knowledge, values and reflexivity within governance spaces; and create different forms of connectivity and autonomy to transform urban foodscapes. The analysis highlights how food partnerships expand beyond formal governance mechanisms and are actively (re)shaped by different

agencies and relationships. This raises the need to explore the transformative capacity of everyday politics, that is, how it can contribute to developing more inclusive, equitable and emancipatory urban foodscapes. At a time of increasing health and social inequalities, urban and food governance studies would benefit from exploring new ways of effectively championing the knowledges, needs and experiences of those still living 'at the margins'.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Cities have become key transition spaces to address current sustainability and food security challenges. In the last decades, urban areas have devised food as a vehicle to integrate different municipal policy arenas and deliver public goods (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999; Morgan, 2009). By and large, the main innovations of this wave of urban food policy revolve around the development of a holistic approach to transform the food system and the inclusion of different stakeholders in the city's food governance (Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015). An important mechanism to deliver this novel approach to urban food policy is the creation of new spaces of deliberation, where civil society, the public and private sector come together through structures such as food policy councils, food partnerships or alliances to deliver good food for all (see Harper et al., 2009). The creation of these cross-sectoral urban partnerships has broadened the food policy remit by incorporating a range of topics such as planning, health or poverty that were systematically side-lined in national and international agri-food policy debates (Lang et al., 2009).

The number of cities actively intervening in reshaping their food governance dynamics has recently escalated, as evidenced by the 170 mayors across the world who have

committed to develop sustainable food systems by signing the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact. To date, research on this phenomenon has concentrated on analysing the origin, content and process of creating urban food strategies and associated alliances (see recent multi-site analyses such as those by Scherb et al., 2012; Clayton et al., 2015). As yet, however, no critical analysis has been performed to expose the opportunities but also challenges of establishing civil society – private - public sector partnerships. In the wider governance scholarship, these processes through which actors interact to achieve common goals - i.e. interactive governance – is often depicted as a pragmatic and “depolitized process of collaboration” (Torfing et al., 2012:50). Similarly, food governance research has mostly championed an optimistic philosophy (Candel, 2014) that tends to overlook conflicts of interest, winners and losers of different arrangements, and institutional deadlocks. A critical account of these new governance mechanisms is therefore particularly necessary to incorporate fully the political dimension inherent in the production of and access to food. Who participates, why, on what decisions and how? What are the values, discourses and knowledges underpinning these new governance arrangements? How do different actors, sectors and scales interact in specific urban food partnerships to effectively transform governance dynamics? How do these partnerships incorporate diverse political and justice claims?

To begin to answer these questions, this paper examines 8 urban food partnerships which participate in the Sustainable Food Cities Network (SFCN), a national initiative connecting 50 UK cities that are implementing holistic food strategies through multi-stakeholder partnerships. The research design is further explained in section two. Section three reviews recent contributions to the conceptualisation of food governance and proposes a critical governance framework underpinned by three approaches: post-political scholarship, participative justice, and political ecology. These bodies of work

foreground political and geographical research that situates itself politically on the side of the disempowered and, at the same time, engages in advancing our understanding of social-ecological and urban transformations while seeking to inspire emancipatory practices. Following the structure of the analytical framework proposed, section four discusses how the different case studies mobilise notions of equity, participation and inclusion; co-produce knowledge, values and reflexivity within new governance spaces; and create different forms of connectivity and autonomy to transform urban foodscapes. Finally, the concluding section assesses the conceptual and practical usefulness of this framework to embed political and justice dimensions in the creation of new governance spaces with the aim of generating mechanisms that deliver more equitable food systems, and pointing out new avenues for further research on urban food politics.

## **2. RESEARCH DESIGN**

Our methodology consisted of a two-step data collection process. First, secondary data produced by the Sustainable Food Cities Network was analysed - including newsletters, websites, emails, and internal documents - to understand the diversity of cities within the network and design semi-structured interviews with the three initiators of the SFCN. These interviews informed the selection of eight cities according to the diversity of governance structures (see table 1). The sample includes cities of different sizes and levels of socio-economic development where a mixture of civil society organisations or public bodies host city-wide food partnerships.

Table 1 Case Studies

<b>Case studies</b>	<b>Home organisation of food partnership</b>
<i>Bath and North East Somerset Local Food Partnership</i>	Public sector. Coordinator housed within Local Authority, Sustainability Team, but funded by Public Health.
<i>Sustainable Food City Bournemouth and Poole</i>	Public sector. Coordinator housed in the Economic Development Team within the City Council.
<i>Bristol Food Policy Council (BFPC) and Bristol Food Network (BFN)</i>	Public sector, specifically in the city council. BFN is fully independent and employs the coordinator.
<i>Cambridge Sustainable Food</i>	Fully independent, staffed entirely by volunteers.
<i>Food Cardiff</i>	Public sector. Coordinator is housed between City Council and Health Board.
<i>Liverpool Food People</i>	Fully independent, staffed entirely by volunteers.
<i>Food Newcastle Partnership</i>	Civil society organisation, which employs the coordinator of the partnership.
<i>Feeding Stockport</i>	Civil society organisation, which employs the coordinator of the partnership.

Source: Interviews and SFCN documents.

The second step consisted of the analysis of secondary data (e.g. internal and external communication documents including evaluation reports) from the selected cities which

informed the design of nine semi-structured interviews with the food partnership coordinators. These interviews focused on the emergence and evolution of the partnerships, characterisation of stakeholder participation, opportunities and limitation of working with local governments and/or civil society organisations (CSO) and the challenges they are facing. The data collected were complemented with extensive field notes taken during regular interactions with members of these partnerships, consisting of descriptions of the context, people and conversations as well as the observer feelings, thoughts and ideas emerging from these encounters. The field notes include, among others, the participation in nine Sustainable Food Cities Network events that took place between 2015 and 2018 in different UK locations, informal interactions with SFCN members in meetings and through email or phone<sup>1</sup>. These informal spaces allowed the better capture of the broader politics at play within the partnerships and the network.

### **3. TOWARDS A CRITICAL GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK**

Food governance remains an ill-defined term in academic and practitioner arenas alike, resulting in a rather narrow and simplistic use of the concept in the food security community (Candel, 2014). Critical scholars have warned against de-politicised notions of governance that obscure existing power imbalances amongst different stakeholders (Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003). This paper aligns with recent contributions in the food domain that stress the normative dimension of governance, and accordingly define it as “all modes of governing encompassing activities carried out by different actors to guide,

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews were taped, verbatim transcribed and conducted under the premise of anonymity. The quotes in this manuscript are derived from recorded interviews. The notes contribute to give context and describe in more depth the politics at play. By and large anonymity is respected but in some cases, however, in some cases, interviewees gave permission to disclose their name and role in their partnership and/or their quotes have already been published in websites or open access reports.

steer, control or manage the pursuance of public goods - such as food security and sustainability” (Moragues-Faus et al., 2017:185).

Despite conceptual debates, governance has been signalled as a key lever to address food security and sustainability challenges (Pereira & Ruysenaar, 2012). For example, Moragues et al (2017) identify five food system governance deficiencies that hinder food security, these being: “a failure to deal with cross-scale dynamics, the inability to address persistent inequalities in food rights and entitlements, increasing geopolitical and sectorial interdependencies, power imbalances and low institutional capacities, and conflicting values and interpretations of food security” (p.184). Other works on food governance point out policy coherence, institutional coordination and adopting a systemic approach as key aspects for delivering sustainability and food security outcomes (Drimie & Ruysenaar, 2010; Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015). Similarly, existing literature on the governance of socio-ecological systems recommends implementing co-management strategies to assure diversity and comprehensiveness in understanding food system challenges and solutions; and establishing boundary organizations that convene and mediate between the different interests at play in the food system (Folke et al., 2005; Cash et al., 2006; Termeer et al., 2010). Indeed, involving civil society organisations in the governance of food systems is deemed to be crucial to identify local problems and response gaps, build legitimacy and public support for interventions, create synergies between government agencies operating at different levels and sectors, and offer new capacities to those working on the public and private sector (Koc et al., 2008; McKeon, 2011).

However, the analysis of novel interactions amongst civil society, private sector and public bodies requires critical tools that overcome reportedly mainstream optimistic

approaches within the food domain and beyond (Peters and Pierre, 2016), as recently reported in political science debates on interactive governance (Torfing et al; 2012). A more grounded and critical analytical framework will be instrumental to expose the opportunities but also challenges associated with these alliances and unpack the political dimension inherent in reshaping governance dynamics. Ultimately, the aim of such a framework is to unveil the underlying governance processes that (re)produce or transform current inequalities and injustices in particular foodscapes. In order to start delineating the contours of this critical governance framework, I build on three bodies of literature shaping contemporary geographical debates that interrogate the political dimension of socio-ecological transformations and provide a novel basis to expand the current scholarship on assessing governance processes: post-political scholarship, participative justice and political ecology. These bodies of work provide new pointers to unpick not only the democratic implications of interactive forms of governance – which are highly debated in political science fora (Torfing et al., 2012) - but also incorporate in these assessments key values such as equity and justice.

The **post-political literature** highlights the current absence of politics and power in governance conceptualisations and practices (Torfing at al., 2012). Critical scholars have explored these de-politization processes characterised by the reduction of democratic practices to bureaucratic technocracies. These processes are based on spurious participation that disregards dissent and champions consensual modes of decision-making led by dominant economic and political interests (Crouch, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2010). This neoliberal co-opting of democracy is particularly visible in interactive governance arenas (Swyngedouw, 2005), such as public-private partnerships or, potentially, public-civil society alliances; and these apolitical tendencies are also present in food governance spaces. A recent example is the linkage of multi-actor partnerships

such as food policy councils to a democracy-enhancing process (Levkoe, 2011) without a deeper examination of the values and politics at play in these governance mechanisms (Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015). A critical reading of the **post-political literature**<sup>2</sup> thus prompts us to consider how these new alliances actually

“contribute to more *egalitarian food democracies*, that is, how these initiatives incorporate eruptions of discontent and calls for equity and freedom in new institutional configurations that change our food practices and build egalitarian spaces where people have the *capacity to act politically*” (Moragues-Faus, 2017a:468).

The institutionalisation of these expressions of dissent, or in other works, understanding how new structures incorporate ‘the political’, requires a deeper analysis of the development of organisational forms, the construction of ethical repertoires and shared values, and the linkages of these new spaces to other processes of social change (ibid). This strand of literature thus provides critical tools for assessing institutionalisation processes which by and large are praised as desirable in the governance literature (Torfing et al., 2012). A more fluid understanding of the interactions between multiple actors allows us to recognise different agencies and opportunities for food system transformation (Moragues-Faus and Sonnino, 2018). For example, urban food partnerships develop collective discourses and capacities to act, and at the same time, maintain the distributed agency of their members, such as civil society organisations, and public and private sector actors (ibid). These overlapping agencies require critical examination to unpack the political dimension of new governance mechanisms.

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<sup>2</sup> See also Beveridge and Kock (2017) for a recent critique to the post-political ‘trap’.

The post-political literature provides a critical reading of institutionalisation processes as a key to build more emancipatory societies by focusing on the changing relations and agencies of different actors and the place of ‘the political’ within these new arrangements. However, it does not incorporate fully the notion of justice, which remains central to constructing more egalitarian food systems. The term justice has been subject to multiple interpretations and uses in the food domain (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010; Sbicca, 2012). Fraser (2008) identifies three key justice dimensions: economic, socio-cultural, and political. The political dimension of injustice is particularly relevant in governance assessments, especially to understand processes of misframing or “when questions of justice are wrongly framed in a way that exclude some from consideration” (Fraser 2008: 19). However, when defining justice, not only the ‘what’ of justice, but also ‘who’ counts as a subject of justice require careful attention to avoid reproducing inequalities; this includes “clarifying the sites - structures/individuals- and the scales of justice - e.g. national, international” (Moragues-Faus, 2017:98).

Despite conceptual progress, in many instances, food justice claims take a narrow definition of the term, for example privileging the local before more holistic and diverse portrayals of the food system (Jarosz, 2014). This lack of reflexivity as reported in some food justice projects (see Cadieux & Slocum 2015:9-10 for examples) might overlook the political dimension of justice, therefore restricting the capacity of these initiatives to enact more **participative justice** conceptualisations; that is, where people actively participate in decisions and politics that can foster or prevent the reproduction of inequalities (Moragues-Faus, 2017). Enacting participative justice requires an awareness around how inequalities – such as food insecurities or misrepresentation in participatory processes - “often converge where marginal identities intersect” (Sachs and Patel-Campillo, 2014: 400). A participative justice approach to analyse emerging

governance configurations therefore entails embedding an intersectional perspective that interrogates how interlocking systems of class, race, gender, nationality and ethnicity interact to produce particular foodscapes. This intersectional perspective needs to be carried across scales and sectors of the food system, with particular foci on both the processes of framing and representation in governance spaces, and the reflexive practices that might prevent the reproduction of injustices.

Participative justice literature shares with the political ecology community its concern with the consequences of socio-environmental transformations for those at the margins.

**Political ecology** consists of “empirical, research-based explorations to explain linkages in the condition and change of social/environmental systems, with explicit consideration of relations of power” (Robbins, 2012:391). It thus emphasises the ecological dimension of societal transformations serving as a tool to unpack the socio-natural processes that (re)produce injustices within societies and across geographies (Hubbard et al., 2002; Brenner, 2009). Political ecology narratives explore who are the *winners and losers* of socio-environmental changes, exposing the economic, social and power relations operating across different spaces. Consequently, a political ecology perspective questions if the new spaces of deliberation emerging in cities support meaningful changes over the complex flows of goods and bads that configure the current unjust and unsustainable food system. The inclusion of political ecology in a critical governance framework contributes, first, to an emphasis on the historical and place-based contingency of current socio-ecological configurations and their potential transformations (see Perreault et al. 2015). And, secondly, it invites us to adopt a more politically aware approach to understanding co-production processes, among others by problematizing what, how and by whom knowledge is produced (Forsyth, 2003). The situated and grounded approach championed by political ecologists ultimately can

contribute to revealing and empowering different discourses, knowledges and lived experiences of food insecurity in specific territories (Moragues-Faus & Marsden, 2017).

Post-political, participative justice, and political ecology repertoires provide powerful analytical tools to develop a critical governance framework. To start unpacking these political and justice claims in specific governance mechanisms, Table 2 below presents the first attempt to develop a critical governance framework. Drawing on the literature review presented above, three key dimensions and a series of analytical questions have been identified to understand how – and if – specific governance mechanisms modify incumbent governance dynamics by changing: i) who participates, on what decisions and how (equity, participation and inclusion); ii) how are values and knowledges (co)produced and how is ‘the political’ incorporated in these new arrangements (knowledge, values and reflexivity); and, iii) how different actors, sectors and scales interact in specific places (connectivity and autonomy). The next section applies this framework to a specific governance mechanism, urban food partnerships.

Table 2. A critical governance framework

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Key analytical questions and pointers</b>
<i>Equity, participation and inclusion</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arrangements and organisational forms of new spaces of deliberation (PP)</li> <li>• Processes of representation and framing that include/exclude particular groups and needs (PJ)</li> <li>• Winners and losers of new governance configurations (PE)</li> </ul>
<i>Knowledge, Values and Reflexivity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How are knowledges (co)produced and reified? (PE)</li> <li>• What values underpin organisational structures? (PP)</li> <li>• Capacity of processes/spaces of integrating/reacting to dissent (PP)</li> <li>• Reflexive mechanisms (PJ)</li> </ul>

<i>Connectivity and autonomy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Place (or social-ecological context) contingency (PE)</li> <li>• Cross-sectoral and cross-scalar interactions (PE, PJ)</li> <li>• Collective and distributed agencies (PP)</li> <li>• Changing relationships between state, civil society and private sector (PP)</li> </ul>
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Source: Author's own elaboration. PE: political ecology, PP: post-political, PJ: participative justice.

#### **4. A CRITICAL GOVERNANCE ANALYSIS OF URBAN FOOD PARTNERSHIPS IN THE UK**

##### **4.1 Mobilising notions of equity, participation and inclusion**

The cities analysed in this paper create multiple spaces for interaction which generally include formal and informal mechanisms, from mailing lists to executive boards (see Table 3). The **organisational forms** of these spaces of deliberation are therefore varied, fluid and, in many instances, unspecified. As a Cardiff informant puts it:

*"I did have a vision of trying and making it very structured, but it was obvious that that was not the way that it was going to work for this city. I think how it has worked is being able to facilitate people to contribute in a way that they want to contribute, so making it a very open system. I think what we're seeing as work is coming out of the partnership is because it becomes part of the day job of the people involved in the partnership, (...) it's something that helps satisfy the demands of their objectives."*

Many partnerships "*want people to be able to dip in and out*" (Informant 1) building structures that are "*loose, anyone can join, we don't want to put anybody off*" (Informant 2). By and large, in each city there is a core group that pushes the agenda and a loose extended group to exchange information and provide support (see Table 3). However,

many places have not reflected on and communicated what are the different roles that these overlapping spaces play in reshaping food governance in their cities. Instead, a group of key actors shape the process of framing and constantly re(creating) these spaces which tend to evolve over time.

The lack of definition of organisational structures and mechanisms complicates tracing the efforts made to transform urban food governance significantly into more equitable and inclusive forms. Nevertheless, a key contribution from these novel partnerships is the development of more comprehensive **framings** of local foodscapes and their associated challenges, in a way that allows more stakeholders to participate. These partnerships have fostered new collaborations amongst different actors who were previously excluded from the food policy domain, from planning officials to community garden activists, and, consequently, have enhanced the capacity of cities to address the systemic and place-based nature of food insecurity. By and large, a recent assessment of five of these partnerships concludes that a “wide breadth of activity will not have happened without the partnerships” (SFCN, 2015). One interviewee describes the impact of the partnership as follows:

*“Due to the low level of activity prior to the establishment of the Partnership, all the activity emerging has happened directly as a result of the Food Partnership. Collaborative projects are starting to emerge which draw on the support, expertise and involvement of different partners.” (Informant 3)*

In the UK, the reframing of urban foodscapes has included weaving a narrative of sustainable food cities as healthy spaces, where the involvement of the National Health Service and associated programmes is key. This is particularly the case for Cardiff, which has developed an integrated food policy delivered by a cross-sectoral partnership

coordinated by Public Health Wales. Its flagship initiative is a school holiday hunger programme – now replicated across Wales - to support families with children struggling to access food when free school meals are not available. In other cities, health-related initiatives also work in conjunction with other sectors. For example, in Bournemouth and Poole there is a strong emphasis on supporting sustainable business development while in Stockport efforts are directed towards creating new synergies between sustainable food supply chains and public procurement.

These different framings – and associated activities - invariably affect the **participation** and therefore inclusiveness of the food partnerships. Whereas all interviewees have a holistic account of their local food system they also report challenges in engaging certain actors, notably food businesses, farmers and retailers<sup>3</sup>. For producers and smaller scale food businesses informants justified this lack of engagement as simply a result of lack of time, although it might also reflect how these actors regard the current scale of the local sustainable food city programme as irrelevant and/or preferring to 'liaise with' rather than 'sit on' a partnership, as illustrated by Informant 3 below:

*“Rather than trying to get food businesses to come to meetings, we delivered a couple of projects that were useful for them.(...) So when we say ‘oh we’d love for you to come along to this (...) they see us as a credible organisation and then they make the effort to come.”*

Indeed, a wide range of collaborative activities happen outside these ‘formalised’ spaces which help bring together ‘city-wide’ food strategies. Cardiff’s coordinator explained how *“the Partnership is about so much more than meetings and so much networking*

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<sup>3</sup> Exceptions are Bath where farmers are involved and Bournemouth with business.

*needs to happen outside of the meeting room (...). Picking the phone up, email updates, social media, newsletters and most importantly “coffee” – are all really valuable tools. Understanding that different people respond best to different methods of communication is really useful – not everyone is comfortable sharing ideas in a room full of people” (SFCN, 2017: 8).*

Participation within these partnerships thus presents a variable geometry. Whilst most cities have been successful in creating strong engagement with a core – and in some instances very sizeable – set of food stakeholders (particularly local authorities, public health, universities and NGOs); all interviewees reported the need to continue to extend this beyond ‘the usual suspects’ to reach more of the ‘unconverted’. For example, an informant highlighted the importance of having *“the right people around the table”* referring to those that have power and are influential in the city. Similarly, a Bristol representative states (SFCN, 2017: 27):

*“There is significant value in seeking out and building relationships with key individuals in the city who understand and are motivated by the sustainable food agenda. These people really can shift resources in your direction. Recruiting Directors who are known and with whom people can work effectively has worked well. Open recruitment less so.”*

Many partnerships are also considering how they engage directly with community members and residents – and indeed whether it is their role to do so: but often *“feel ‘lost’ as how to do it”*. To date, there are no mechanisms in the food partnerships studied to safeguard the engagement of those ‘who have no-part’ in the current governance of food systems. Indeed, in many cases the representation and actual participation in food

partnership meetings is dominated by white middle-class people<sup>4</sup>, who in some cases work directly with vulnerable groups, as Informant 5 highlights:

*“We don’t have a diverse mix of officers and we certainly don’t have a good ethnic mix. I think this sector is widely seen as white middle class and even those who are activists come from a family of money.”*

This is particularly problematic when many partnerships refer to their activities and strategies as city-wide. “The city” has become a way of encapsulating the diversity and messiness of relationships that actually constitute these new governance spaces which extend beyond meetings and formal membership.

*“I think when we say ‘city’ we mean the city itself. Partly because of the diversity of partners that we have but it’s recognising that there’s various levels of commitment from all of the partners and some are committed at a personal professional level and others at an organisational level.”* (Informant 3)

However, this oversimplification when referring to the ‘city’ necessarily raises new issues around (mis)representations of urban foodscapes and their justice implications, calling for a critical appraisal of **winners and losers** within these new governance configurations. This new portrayal of the city integrates new voices and perspectives but so far fails to engage with the disempowered and voiceless within the food system in a meaningful way.

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<sup>4</sup> This experience was reinforced throughout fieldwork, when in most partnership meetings I was the only non-White British participant.

**Table 3 Organisational structures of case studies**

Case studies	Organisational structure
<i>Bath and North East Somerset Local Food Partnership</i>	<p>1) Steering group: multi-stakeholder group consisting of Council representatives from a range of departments, Bath District Farmers, Bath Tourism, Transition Bath and Virgin Care (Health Service Providers).</p> <p>2) Wider 'Stakeholder Partnership': holds one event per annum aimed at organisations. There is no formal membership structure. Organisations rather than individuals are involved.</p>
<i>Sustainable Food City Bournemouth And Poole</i>	<p>1) Partnership Board: elected by other members on one member, one vote basis. They oversee the coordinator, guide delivery of action plan, and oversee budget management.</p> <p>2) Project Partners: those partners who want to support the partnership with delivery (includes businesses, organisations and community groups).</p> <p>3) Members: anyone who signs up to supporting the mission.</p>
<i>Bristol Food Policy Council (BFPC) And Bristol Food Network (BFN)</i>	<p>1) Food Policy Council: Membership includes individuals from different elements of the food system including health, business, grassroots, non-governmental organisations, education and local government. It is an un-constituted body and appoints its own chair from within its membership.</p> <p>2) Bristol Food Network: coordinates activity across the city on sustainable food related areas. Board of Directors appointed internally. No membership structure for either Food Policy Council or Bristol Food Network</p>
<i>Cambridge Sustainable Food</i>	<p>1) Committee: Chaired by a civil society organisation with representatives from public health, city council, businesses and civil society.</p> <p>2) Wider membership: around 60 organisations that attend annual general assemblies and can vote.</p> <p>3) Supporters (Individuals): receive newsletter</p> <p>Cambridge Sustainable Food has been constituted as an organisation that brings together wide range of activity already taking place as well as running own projects.</p>
<i>Food Cardiff</i>	<p>1) Steering group: Oversees work. Made up of Public health, City Council, Sustainable Food Cities and WRAP Cymru (CSO, Chair).</p> <p>2) The Business Group: members of key organisations whom are assigned the role of representing and championing an agenda on behalf of Food Cardiff. This group is rather flexible and open.</p> <p>3) The Food Cardiff Community: an open space for all actors interested in sustainable food. Work with the wider community has been recently organised around 5 subgroups focusing on community, economy, procurement, waste/environment and poverty</p>
<i>Liverpool Food People</i>	<p>1) Board of Directors: multi-stakeholder group which directs the work of the Sustainable Food City Liverpool Coordinator</p> <p>2) The community: A wide informal membership base of over 200 people who attend larger events or meetings twice a year. Described as a 'managed network' of food growers, buyers, composters, activists, cooks and eaters.</p>
<i>Food Newcastle Partnership</i>	<p>1) Executive management group: Some represent larger organisations or food activity and some who bring specific expertise.</p> <p>2) Wider community: mailing list of approx. 200 people who receive the newsletter and are invited to meetings and events.</p> <p>The overall Food Newcastle Partnership meets annually to review the Good Food Plan, reflect on the achievements within the priority areas of work, network, share learning and exchange ideas.</p>
<i>Feeding Stockport</i>	<p>1) Operational steering group: Key partners include Stockport Council, Stockport Homes and voluntary and community groups. They work through 4 groups, food poverty task group, community growing network, central food projects and other projects.</p> <p>2) Wider community engaged through events, volunteering, website and members of the steering group.</p>

## 4.2 Co-producing knowledge, values and reflexivity within new governance spaces

Urban food partnerships constitute new spaces to **co-produce place-based knowledge**. Through the integration of different actors in the identification of local challenges and the co-development of potential solutions, these partnerships include new knowledges and lived experiences that help drive food policy reforms. Food city coordinators play a knowledge-broker role by cutting across civil society, public health and local government arenas. This special status allows them to avoid part of the bureaucratic and hierarchical work cultures of the public sector and bring about change more efficiently. For example, a coordinator sees its partnership as playing “*a middle-man role in some of the food production end of things*”, but also actively working to “*make sure that (food) is addressed through the actions of local authorities but also other partners*” for example by engaging with large employers to implement the living wage.

*“So it is really about us pooling the collective knowledge of the partners that we work with and through that identifying where there are gaps (...) and then about how can we use our combined resources to do something about it.”* (Informant 4)

The codification of this place-based knowledge takes form through the co-development of urban food strategies or charters which, generally, involve wide public consultation processes. In many instances, they are also regarded as a means to legitimate and guide these new governance structures. This is the case for Bath, where a small steering group made up of council representatives and civil society organisations developed a food strategy through a broad consultation process. The strategy launched in 2014 “*provides a framework for people and shows that their work is contributing to have a greater impact*”. This steering group transformed into a full multi-stakeholder partnership that holds annual events open to all members “*to assess progress in the strategy and try to*

*identify again where the right course of action should be". Another example is Cambridge, where an informant reports how "the development of the charter forced us to think what it really meant to work on food (...). It forced us to (...) reach(ing) out to different stakeholders and organisations as well as conduct(ing) a participatory consultation including partly funding Eat Cambridge Festival".*

These processes and resulting documents become boundary objects that bridge the breath of food activity conducted in cities with strategic plans to guide partnership work and collectively advance towards more sustainable foodscapes, as a Bristol representative states (SFCN, 2017: 27):

*"In Bristol there are numerous organisations working towards the Sustainable Food Cities goals. We have aimed to accept this diverse complex picture rather than attempted to control it. Our aim is to provide a framework which allows this complexity to flourish."*

Furthermore, urban partnerships actively participate in workshops, webinars and conferences to disseminate their multi-stakeholder and place-based approach to addressing food system challenges beyond their locality, and also to learn from similar experiences<sup>5</sup>.

This process of knowledge co-production and collaboration is facilitated by the **alignment of values** amongst key participants, although these are seldom clearly communicated. Throughout the fieldwork, terms such as openness, participation, accountability, transparency, respect, common or public good emerged as widely shared key words but which rarely translated into specific activities or mechanisms. For

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<sup>5</sup> See the SFCN website for examples: <http://sustainablefoodcities.org/>

example, all the initiatives studied are willing to share minutes of their meetings, include new members in the partnership and run meetings with a clear commitment to respect each other's opinions. However, none of the initiatives interviewed state clearly these values or collectively reflect on how they inform their practices. As Informant5 puts it: *"people are willing to share, is kind of an unwritten rule"*. The interplay between key players shaping governance structures and the values informing these decisions is for example illustrated through the process of changing the partnership structure as narrated by its facilitator:

*"Once there was a coordinator in position, suddenly the steering group didn't feel like it was a very accountable structure to be taking any strategic decisions and was too big to operate as a group and too small to operate as a partnership representative of all interests and all sectors (...). So we slimmed down the steering group which is called the executive group now. We continued to have statutory funders and we brought on board a few new members who we felt brought key expertise. (...) We wanted it to operate like an accountable board."* (Informant 4)

Consensus as a *modus operandi* expands from these (understated) values to notions of sustainability and food security. **Dissent** is therefore regarded as an external force at work beyond these new spaces of deliberation:

*"We're tired of constantly fighting against things, it's important to us that we are not just resisting but creating. But it just seemed a better way to ally yourself with certain sectors of the government"* (Informant 6).

Indeed, these partnerships focus on specific challenges, such as "kids having meals to eat on holidays", which have the power to convene wide agreements and build alliances.

However, when differences do arise around specific solutions – e.g. providing holiday hunger programmes through the public sector or charities – these are seldom discussed in these spaces, instead, partnership members exercise their individual rather than collective agency to pursue their own interests. In this specific case, while dialogue occurred behind closed doors, there was no agreement and both partners pursued their preferred solution, which highlights the fragile commitment to collective decision-making in some of these spaces.

In this regard, tools to build in **reflexivity** can constitute a key mechanism to incorporate the political and justice dimensions of food governance into these urban food partnerships. Indeed, self-analysis and social questioning have been reported as key mechanisms for people to engage with contemporary uncertainties and social coordination problems across scales and sectors (Edwards et al., 2002; Moragues-Faus et al., 2017). Building more enabling and reflexive spaces requires a deliberate focus on the challenges around equity, participation and inclusion highlighted in the previous section, and how they shape food system outcomes. To date, the partnerships studied use a range of activities such as training on specific issues to boost collective thinking, engagement events to assess progress collectively, and peer-to-peer mentoring across cities. These reflexive practices include sharing personal and organisational challenges and developing solutions collaboratively. However, limited resources in terms of time availability, pressing socio-economic and health challenges on the ground and austerity cuts in the public sector foster a sense of urgency that clashes with more critical reflexive governance practices. In this climate, organisations report their struggle to protect and justify dedicating human resources to reflect on how the partnership operates, for

example by collectively unpacking decision-making dynamics, values mobilised and exclusion mechanisms at play within these spaces.

### **4.3 Creating different forms of connectivity and autonomy to transform urban foodscapes**

The emergence and evolution of food partnerships are actively shaped by the socio-ecological dynamics configuring their respective cities. This **place contingency** plays out in different ways, from conditioning what types of activity are 'feasible' – e.g.: *“as partnership we need to be part of understanding what the limitations are of the region in terms of supplying food for the city”* (Informant 4)- to providing a better understanding of specific challenges and capabilities of new governance spaces. In this regard, Informant1 states:

*“A piece of advice that I'd give anyone that's setting up a partnership, is to let it evolve into what it wants to become. You know, you've got to inject the energy into the partnership and some of the mechanisms. But actually it's about letting the partnership find their own way because you've got completely different challenges in the city and if you try and fit a square peg into a round hole, you're not going to be successful.”*

Fostering **connectivity** amongst different food system sectors constitutes a key contribution of these urban food governance mechanisms. All the partnerships studied are also creating trans-local alliances through their participation in the UK-wide Sustainable Food Cities Network. Furthermore, in the case of Cardiff the partnership actively contributes to Welsh-wide policy development, and cities such as Bristol are actively engaged in international networks of experimentation and knowledge sharing (see URBACT). This **reconnection of actors across places, scales and sectors** creates

new opportunities to intervene in the multi-layered governance of the food system through knowledge co-production and the development of collective agencies. As

Interviewee4 puts it:

*“it is important to bring ideas and thoughts from outside the region which is certainly something that our city does struggle with sometimes because it’s quite inward looking. (...) Being part of the SFCN it’s how we can raise the profile of the city. It really appeals to people locally and it does give us some credibility that we are not just off on a whim creating a food partnership but there’s a wider significance to this nationally and based on good examples of what’s worked in other cities.”*

Nevertheless, this connectivity is partial and is constantly re-assembling. As illustrated above, in many cases some sectors are not actively included in these partnerships which by and large fail to represent fully the diversity of actors engaged in the food system. These disconnections are also scalar, since more globalised aspects of the food system such as trade, agricultural policy or retail effectively fall out of the partnerships’ radar.

Some of these disconnections purposefully contribute to carve **autonomy** within a highly interdependent and entrenched food system. A clear example is how food partnerships can cut across local institutional burdens and hierarchies since they are not fully embedded in just one organisation.

*“Our key strengths are definitely that we present a very cost-effective mechanism for engaging a huge and previously unengaged partners within the city.”* (Informant 4)

The development of new and creative modes of collaboration across and within institutions does not preclude partnerships from having to deal with different local interests and agendas. As Interviewee2 describes:

*“We worked hard to have cross-party political support for the strategy, it would have been a risk otherwise with elections changing the landscape. If say for example the SFCN makes a consultation on food poverty, sometimes we don’t get involved in that because it might be sensitive (...) we don’t want to be seen as lobbying towards one party position.”*

There is therefore a dialectic and fluid interaction between ‘allies’ and those that need to be ‘converted’, with a constant redefinition of their respective roles depending on specific issues.

The co-existence of **collective and distributed agencies** within partnerships - that is, the simultaneous capacity of acting together or independently - expands beyond the remit of these governance spaces and their more or less defined roles as a multi-stakeholder structures. There is therefore a continuous reformulation of the **relationships between state and civil society** depending on specific topics and activities. Some partnerships led by the public sector see their role *“is to find the evidence and embed food in policy and use public funding for relevant programmes, also show the community gaps and where people can help deliver objectives and use our influence to unlock some funding, for example of big philanthropic organisations.”* (Informant 2)

For civil society organisations, local governments are key ‘controllers’ of the whole process, *“they can be a gate keeper and actually facilitate change. So much of the*

*partnership program is geared up around looking at inequalities and looking at how we buy food, they have the opportunity to make significant change” (Informant 5). However, partnerships also report challenges in conducting this collaborative work such as the lack of creativity within public institutions and convoluted bureaucracy. Furthermore, amidst austerity cuts, local authorities are losing expertise and resort to communities to step forward.*

*“there’s a lot of over reliance on the goodwill of community. There’s sort of a lack of awareness where the community threshold is (...). They’re operating buildings, services areas, meals on wheels and all of these things are great when things are going well but when there’s problems, volunteers from communities are quite fragile. (...) And then local authorities will not have the capacity to try and put that infrastructure back in.” (Informant 5)*

Nevertheless, while health institutions have embraced the urban food agendas, partnerships hosted both inside and outside the public sector still struggle to establish food as a strategic priority for local government. A real commitment to this agenda would comprise not only recognising the power of food to advance public sector goals, but also embracing a cross-sectoral and more inclusive working culture which involves supporting new forms of governance. As Interviewee4 concludes:

*“For partnerships to work you need political and operational buy in, so there needs to be more work done nationally and locally to develop the understanding of why partnerships are important for system change”.*

## **5. CONCLUSION: EMBEDDING JUSTICE AND THE POLITICAL IN GOVERNANCE SPACES TO BUILD EMANCIPATORY URBAN FOODSCAPES**

This paper proposes a critical governance framework building on the integration of key insights from post-political, participative justice, and political ecology literatures. The application of this framework to the development and functioning of urban food partnerships in the UK highlights the usefulness of taking a critical approach to governance. Rather than just celebrating collaboration, this paper reveals progress made by urban food partnerships, but also the need to integrate further the justice and political dimensions of governance dynamics in order to generate mechanisms that actually underpin the emergence of more equitable food systems.

First, the analysis shows how the fluidity of new governance mechanisms in the urban food domain allows developing synergies between departments and enhances the effectiveness of specific programmes but, at the same time, reproduces some exclusionary dynamics. New urban food policies are being fashioned by including new sectors – for example health or community organisations - which were previously silenced. However, those with ‘no-voice’ at the margins of the food system, such as groups experiencing food poverty, or different ethnicities, continue to be by and large excluded in the new reframing of urban food systems.

Despite these absences, food partnerships actively co-produce place-based food knowledges and policies through participatory processes based on consensus building around values and concepts. This place sensitivity allows specific city challenges to emerge, however, the place-contingent character of these initiatives needs to reject place-restricted visions that prevent critical questioning and transformations of unjust socio-ecological configurations. Indeed, additional efforts are required to expand place-

based transformative capacities and spaces that provide tools to develop more inclusive and fair foodscapes. While some of these changes are underway through these partnerships – i.e. broader participation, inclusion of more sectors, reframing foodscapes – the analysis shows the need to develop further reflexive mechanisms. Among others, reflexive tools could be instrumental in recognising people’s diverse needs and desires, as well as opening spaces to the dissent and conflict inherent in socio-ecological transformations, while assuring activity on the ground.

Finally, the urban food partnerships studied are reconnecting actors and agencies across sectors, scales and places, which inevitably create new power geometries. New relationships and positionalities are being forged within local social movements, but also between civil society organisations and the state; from civil society delivering services and actively developing food policies, to the city council providing leadership in places where there is a lack of social movement activity. The interplay between new forms of connectivity and autonomy among these actors poses new questions around whether these new alliances are transformative and provide the grounds for more emancipatory politics. The lack of clear mechanisms and values governing these relationships raises the need to address key elements such as entitlement and status (who can or is allowed to participate), transparency and representation (who represents who and how), and accountability and legitimacy.

Consequently, a key insight emerging from this research concerns the importance of developing a better understanding of the intersections amongst inclusion, transformation and the institutionalisation of the political. The application of the critical governance framework proposed shows how the political and justice dimension of urban food alliances cannot be fully accounted for by merely focusing on emerging

institutions and organisations. Governance spaces expand beyond formal structures. These mechanisms are indeed actively (re)shaped by different agencies and relationships that call for further investigation of how emancipatory practices are (or can be) embedded in everyday politics. This implies incorporating into critical frameworks non-structuralist accounts of governance, which so far have dominated the literature, and particularly in post-political texts (Beveridge & Koch, 2017). Expanding on the emerging concept of everyday governance (Cornea et al., 2017), a first step could be the exploration of the transformative capacity of everyday politics, that is, how this can contribute to developing more inclusive, equitable and emancipatory urban foodscapes, and their interaction with more formal governance mechanisms. The focus on the everyday offers an opportunity to embrace the diversity of food experiences within the 'sustainable food city' and requires expanding our subject of inquiry to the non-participants in governance spaces. At a time of increasing health and social inequalities, urban, food and governance studies would benefit from exploring new ways of effectively championing the knowledges, needs and experiences of those still living 'at the margins'.

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