

# Involving Citizen Experts in Sustainability Assessment of the City Region Food System

Katharina Späth  
Heidrun Moschitz  
Heide Hoffmann

**The path to a sustainable city region food system (CRFS) is unique for every city. And who knows a city better than the people who live in it? We tested a new approach in the city of Basel, Switzerland, to involve citizens in the creation of a sustainability assessment tool for the city's food system.**

As one of the first signatories of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, Basel city administration expressed interest in measuring their progress towards achieving a sustainable food system. They partnered with the [Research Institute of Organic Agriculture \(FiBL\)](#) to advertise a Master thesis position to address this challenge. Given the complex nature of a city's food system and the limited resources available for funding a Master thesis, we selected 17 experts representing society, policy and the market. We interviewed them on their needs regarding a sustainable Basel CRFS and came up with 65 evaluation criteria.

## Steps taken to define the assessment criteria

The following steps were taken to use the experts' knowledge to define the criteria to assess the sustainability of the Basel CRFS. First, the experts were invited to contribute their expertise to the project. All experts are active in the arena of food and sustainability in Basel and represent various divisions of city administration, food business, or civil society, including a representative of a farmers' association, a food waste consultant, a manager of a food bank, and food activists. Second, individual face-to-face interviews collected opinions, background information and ideas. Two questions were posed to everyone: "What do you consider important when you think of a sustainable city region food system?" and "Describe your idea of a sustainable state of ... [the topic discussed]". Interviewees were able to list a number of topics but, in many cases, the perfect sustainable state could not be described. Nevertheless, many times the interviewees could qualify what they considered to be crucial points towards sustainability. Next, the interviews were analysed and the relevant topics were distilled. In a final step, these topics were each rephrased into potential evaluation criteria with a target description.

## What to evaluate in Basel?

There were many interpretations of the term "sustainable food system", although topics did overlap in many cases. We identified 65 evaluation criteria in four categories: ecology, economy, social and governance.

Probably because the **ecological** dimension is most often associated with the term sustainability, the most common topics were listed in this category: increasing organic and responsible agriculture, reducing meat consumption, striving for a circular economy, shortening transport routes, consuming seasonally as well as reducing food waste and packaging.

Statements assigned to the category **economy** were more specific to Basel. With awareness of the powerful oligopoly of the two main Swiss retailers, there were different opinions on how to shape an economy with fair distribution of benefits and costs among producers, retailers and consumers. Experts proposed solutions like direct marketing, contract farming and support to food start-ups. One evaluation criteria was, for example, "equal opportunities", meaning that there should be incentives for start-ups and small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) to enter the market and create an acceptable livelihood. Another specific feature of Basel is its proximity to Germany. The food discounters right across the border pose a great challenge to Swiss stores: they offer food at prices much lower than in Switzerland because of both the advantageous exchange rate from Swiss francs to euros and a generally lower price level in Germany. The evaluation criterion target description in this case would be to find a solution which would maintain purchasing power in Switzerland and generate a livelihood for Basel's shopkeepers and local (but Swiss) producers.

The predominant issue in the category **social** was a loss of appreciation for food. According to the interviewees this is the reason for the low willingness to pay for food and the huge amount of food waste. Many linked the loss of appreciation to a lack of awareness. Since awareness may be increased by education, some of the evaluation criteria refer to issues such as education about the environmental impact of food, working conditions in the food sector or successful storage of fresh or processed food.

Many of the interviewees hold the **government** responsible for creating a supportive environment. Food should become more visible in the daily discourse and the city should commit to a path towards a sustainable CRFS – addressing the ecological, the economical and the social dimension of sustainability equally. It was suggested that the city should perform periodic impact analyses. The government should also protect citizens from any kind of fraud related to food, such as the misuse of labelling or false pretences in advertising.



Community Garden Basel, Switzerland. Photo by FiBL

### A complete indicators list?

The list of evaluation criteria compiled in such a participatory way runs the risk of remaining incomplete if particular perspectives or interest groups are not, or not sufficiently, involved. Also, certain criteria that may be highly important in some cities, and are therefore often listed in sustainability assessments, might not be relevant in other cities. Additionally, any list of indicators can only be useful if data collection and monitoring is feasible and is used for reviewing progress and improving planning and policy. What, then, should be the focus: a complete list of indicators or a selected list of priorities? And who decides, and at what point, that the list of evaluation criteria is complete? This study concluded that integrating citizens' knowledge and opinions is as useful as using external experts' efforts. However, the next stage of the process, integration and adaptation, should also be participatory, and adaptation of the indicators should be an on-going process.

### What is it good for?

Although it took quite an effort to involve a variety of experts in the process of finding evaluation criteria to assess the sustainability state of the Basel CRFS, the result was impressive. Involving citizens in the sustainability assessment of their city's food system generates two clear advantages.

One advantage is that, by integrating the broad and diverse knowledge, expertise and creativity of the experts, a wide range of relevant, meaningful and location-specific criteria was established. With this set of criteria, the city of Basel now

has a basis for developing an assessment tool to find out about the current status and, in the next step, to define benchmarks for the path towards a sustainable CRFS.

The second advantage is that the participatory approach can also be the starting point for further collaboration between the various actors. The study showed that there is a high level of cooperation and passion among those who participated. Their involvement might have started to create more ownership for making the city's region food system more sustainable. Involving even more people might enlarge the support base, facilitate the implementation of future measures and increase the chances for success in the long run.

### Acknowledgement

Financial support from the Frauenförderung (Promotion of Women) of the Humboldt-University zu Berlin for carrying out the study is gratefully acknowledged.

Katharina Späth  
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin  
[katharina.spaeth@hu-berlin.de](mailto:katharina.spaeth@hu-berlin.de)

Heidrun Moschitz  
Research Institute of Organic Agriculture, Switzerland  
[heidrun.moschitz@fibl.org](mailto:heidrun.moschitz@fibl.org)

Heide Hoffmann  
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin