

A Toolbox for Action

What do we mean by success? How can we convince others that what we do has a positive impact on the urban foodscape? And... are we actually having an impact? What are the most effective activities we can implement in the context of austerity? These questions prompted a fruitful collaboration with the Sustainable Food Cities Network: a network of 50 cities in the UK that are developing food strategies and associated local food partnerships to deliver them. We initiated a participatory-action research process to develop an indicators toolbox that will help food partnerships start addressing these big questions.

The Sustainable Food Cities Network (SFCN) is a partnership project coordinated by three UK NGOs – the Soil Association, Sustain and Food Matters – that, since 2011, brings together public, private and civil society organisations to share challenges, explore practical solutions and develop good practice in all aspects of sustainable food. For that purpose, the SFCN has developed a platform for peer-to-peer support and exchange of good practices; offers tailored support, hands-on advice, training material and resources; runs

national and local campaigns to drive change; organises events and webinars; provides funds to support local activities and has designed an awardWWs framework.

The SFCN now joins 50 cities across the UK, and constitutes a step forward in scaling urban food strategies in the UK up and out, representing a unique experience in the world of urban food policy (Moragues-Faus, 2017). In this context, the SFCN wanted to help cities measure their progress in developing sustainable food systems and providing a holistic account of the food system, at the same time acknowledging place-based specificities and differences. The remainder of this article presents the motivation for this project, the process of co-producing indicators and the lessons learned.

Why do we need indicators?

The evaluation of programmes and development of indicators is complex and time-consuming. A myriad of sustainability assessment exercises exist at the local, national and international level, using different frameworks and implementing diverse methodologies (Prosperi et al., 2015). Why was the SFCN interested in indicators? For three main reasons:

First, the SFCN promotes working through food partnerships and across sectors. To be a member of the SFCN a city needs to have in place a multi-stakeholder partnership and collectively develop a food action plan to work across

Sustainable Food Cities Network Conference 2017. Photo by Sustainable Food Cities Network





Workshop on identifying indicators at City University, September 2015. Photo by the Food Research Collaboration

sustainability dimensions, including health and wellbeing, social justice, economic aspects and environmental challenges. While this approach is increasingly being adopted by a range of initiatives, it is still relatively new in the urban food policy world. And, by and large, it remains a shared challenge to assess – as well as communicate – **the collective impact of working together**. Consequently, an assessment framework that shows the connections and synergies between sectors and actors can contribute to supporting more holistic and participatory interventions in the food system. This can result in more commitment to support backbone organisations and cross-sectoral programmes by various stakeholders and funders.

Second, the development of a framework that includes health and social wellbeing, economic and environmental outcomes can help **make the case** for different sectors to work together and meet their goals through food-related activities. For example, some of the health and social wellbeing indicators identified in this framework match key performance indicators of the UK Public Health Service, which allows food partnerships to bring on board key institutions. In this regard, it is particularly important to include the evidence that shows how specific food initiatives contribute to improving particular indicators related to specific food system outcomes, e.g. providing studies that show the impact on obesity rates of reducing exposure to unhealthy food environments.

Finally, in the context of austerity food partnerships and policy, councils struggle to **define priorities**. A framework that maps current food activity in the city can help identify areas that need further work, and key gaps in terms of types

of activities – policies, training or market-based tools – and also what sustainability dimensions are addressed: health and wellbeing, environment and economic prosperity. Furthermore, if this framework contains evidence of how specific food initiatives contribute to progress-specific indicators, it becomes a toolbox to inform decision-making.

Co-producing an indicators toolbox for action

We designed a participatory-action research process in order to co-produce a place-based, holistic and action-oriented assessment framework. The process was led by academics and SFCN practitioners, and involved diverse stakeholders in order to assure a collective identification of goals and criteria for selecting indicators. The project was articulated around the following steps.

First, a review of both academic and “grey” literature led to identifying the different types of assessment frameworks mobilised in the food realm, as well as the range of indicators used to measure the environmental, social and economic sustainability of urban food systems (see Prosperi et al., 2015).

Second, the results of this literature review guided the design of four participative workshops enrolling more than 100 practitioners to define a vision for a sustainable food city and to identify the most relevant indicators to guide action towards that goal. The workshops were organised geographically (Cardiff, London, Edinburgh and Liverpool) in order to grasp differences across places that might shape the type of partnerships and activities being developed, and therefore assessment priorities, as well as maximise participation of city governments and civil society organisations in the project.

A third step consisted of synthesising the results of the workshops and verifying the feasibility and coherence of the selected indicators on the basis of the available literature and insights from practitioners. A draft toolbox was widely disseminated for that purpose. This included conducting a webinar with 42 attendees. A meeting with 17 academics and practitioners was also organised in London to gather extra feedback. In total more than 70 participants provided comments on the draft toolbox.

Finally, we applied the framework to two cities, Bristol and Cardiff, actively involved in the SFCN. This step included gathering information from different institutions and databases produced in the last five years to feed the indicators toolbox and gain additional insights, e.g. providing a reflection around each indicator and complementary sources of information.

These activities have resulted in the development of a conceptual framework and toolbox to measure progress towards sustainable food cities, and can be accessed below.

Lessons learned

- While it is important **not to reinvent the wheel**, it is equally relevant to **broaden participation** of stakeholders in the definition of the framework. This is essential for making sure to develop a tool that responds to people's needs and is therefore useful and actually implemented in specific local contexts.
- At the moment, our experience in the UK shows that it is virtually impossible to develop or select food-related indicators at the city level that are accessible, reliable, comprehensive and inexpensive to collect. It is important to acknowledge these **trade-offs** and use criteria for the selection of indicators that is most important for potential users. Rather than developing a perfect assessment framework, we sought to develop a useful, flexible toolbox that recognises its limitations. In our case, some of the meta-indicators are more accessible than others; for example, it is easy to monitor the decrease in the number of overweight or obese people, and more difficult to measure changes in the number of jobs in the local food economy. It is also beneficial to break down indicators in terms of neighbourhoods, gender, age, income and ethnic background.
- The combination of a **systemic approach to food sustainability and a place-based perspective** is a key characteristic of this framework. We were committed to developing a non-prescriptive framework that accommodates the diversity of UK cities and takes into account that there are various pathways towards sustainability. Furthermore, the framework not only assesses progress, but helps map current activities, connect to different sectors and stakeholders in the city, and inspire action.

Next steps

The toolkit is a living project that will be progressively refined. The next steps to continue improving the tool have been defined:

- We will align the meta-indicators with other international processes taking place, such as those developed by the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact. These meta-indicators will also be weighted in order to provide a visual result of the assessment, that allows cities to visualise their progress and key challenges, as well as a comparison between cities to foster good practice exchanges.
- Though, at the moment, the framework can be accessed as a document, the SFCN is in the process of developing an interactive toolkit where the top-down and bottom-up entries could be more intuitive and user-friendly. This interactive platform will be ready before the end of 2018.

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More information

Download the toolbox: [Making the case and measuring progress: towards a systems approach to healthy and sustainable food](#).
Webinar: We held a webinar in December 2016 during which we discussed this toolbox. It can take you through its various elements, how it could be used and how we came to develop it. Listen to a recording and view presentations [here](#).