



# 'Cities for Agroecology' Networks in Europe and Spain

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In December 2016, the Zaragoza City Council organised an international seminar on **Cities for Agroecology**. This event marked the start of two parallel processes of city networking, at European and national level. The Milan Urban Food Policy Pact World Mayor's meeting in Valencia (October 2017) represents an important milestone in the consolidation of agroecological approaches in sustainable urban food policies as both networks are advancing fast.

## Introduction and background

Zaragoza City Council, in cooperation with local civic organisations, has been involved in restoring and protecting its traditional "huerta": thousands of hectares of historical and highly fertile orchards within the municipality. From 2013 to 2016 the city used a LIFE program grant for the project "Environmental recovery of peri-urban areas through intervention in the ecosystem and organic farming". The project adopted an agroecological approach, in which advancing towards a localised, sustainable food system would be the cornerstone for maximising ecosystem services delivered by peri-urban agricultural areas.

The LIFE project built upon municipal organic community gardens started in the 80s and the weekly organic farmers' market, with some key additions. Project funding was used for the following activities: a school for new peri-urban farmers; a public-private partnership land bank; an organic farmers cooperative; the provision of public infrastructure for local food logistics; sustainable public food procurement; promotion of organic food in municipal markets, 17 small retailers and 15 restaurants; and, public awareness campaign

on local and organic food. After three years, the Red Agroecológica de Zaragoza was created, linking 17 agricultural holdings on 57 ha of organic farming with 22 new farmers. Consequently, Zaragoza has become a leader in national and European agroecology-oriented food policy.

The 2016 international seminar on 'Cities for Agroecology' held in Zaragoza was part of the LIFE project. It was organised in cooperation with Fundación Entretantos – an NGO specialised in participatory processes and networking around territory and sustainability. More than 150 people attended the meeting, including representatives from more than 20 European cities. A special workshop was organised for city representatives to discuss the creation of a European network of cities. The high interest and attendance from Spanish cities, each with their local specificities, drove the organisation to launch an additional process at national scale that eventually led to the Spanish Network of 'Cities for Agroecology'.

## What does 'Cities for Agroecology' mean?

The discussion on agroecological food policies at Zaragoza's seminar addressed some of the following key topics in terms of network actions:

- **Promoting local production, processing and consumption of organic food**, either officially certified or included within Participatory Guarantee Systems
- Addressing **ecological features related to local food systems**, especially on upstream processes such as input provision, and **regulating ecosystem services** such as water quality, soil fertility, organic matter cycling, crop biodiversity
- **Supporting professional agriculture within local food system frameworks**, aiming to develop City-Region Food Systems (CRFS)
- **Activation and protection of urban and peri-urban agricultural lands** and landscapes, while granting access

to land for new entrants and professionals into organic farming

- **Strengthening the local food supply and logistic networks** for local stakeholders by providing: public infrastructure, logistics coordination, public procurement, and supporting Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes
- **Promoting access of consumers to local, organic food** by raising awareness and engaging with communities on how they access appropriate local, high-quality food
- Focusing on the **practical implementation of policies** through participatory, good food governance mechanisms with local civil society and private actors, while avoiding getting lost in organisational and bureaucratic barriers that may harm operational capacity.

Internationally, there is a growing number of city networks oriented to sustainable food systems, especially after the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP). Emerging from this, we anticipate future strong engagement with organic farming, local production and beyond. The agroecological approach entails a deep commitment to sustainability as well as a major commitment to social justice regarding food systems. This approach therefore includes the concept of food sovereignty and environmental and food justice. It is an ambitious and transformative agenda for urban food policy.

### Some declarations from representatives of Spanish cities

- *For Teresa Artigas, Environmental counsellor of Zaragoza and promoter of both networks, joining means “an important step forwards in the efforts the city is already undertaking towards sustainable agri-food and territorial models”*
- *In a recent press release, the City Council of Manresa (Catalonia) stated that “We have been working for years on supporting public and private initiatives to promote local and sustainable agriculture, and it would be very positive to consolidate a model based on agroecology principles among producers, intermediaries and consumers. The aim of the Networks is to share strategies, information and action proposals”*
- *The City Council of Palma de Mallorca has developed a participatory assessment of the agri-food sector in the city, and implemented actions on city organic markets, consumer and school awareness, and is now working on an access-to-land tool for organic farmers. For the Ecology Counsellor, Neus Truylol, “strengthening an agroecological model of production and stopping the decrease in farming activity within Palma is a fundamental aim with a triple benefit: environmental, agricultural and social, regarding new job possibilities. Joining the Spanish network will help us to work in this direction”.*

### Two nested networks with one common process

In 2017, the cities involved in the [AgroEcoCities European Network](#) had several online meetings following up Zaragoza’s seminar. These were supported economically by Zaragoza City Council and technically by Fundación Entretantos. A Steering Committee was set up, including city officers from Brugge, Ghent, Freiburg, Zaragoza and València and city representative organisations like Liverpool Food People and the Bristol Food Council. In May we held two thematic group webinars on food waste and local food governance. These incorporated other cities and civic organisations to exchange and discuss practical experiences. The continuity of the network needs to be sustained by a shared interest in running activities; there will not be any formalised structure. The next physical meeting will be held in autumn, and probably linked to València’s MUFPP summit.

In early 2017, Zaragoza and València City Councils, in a consortium with Fundación Entretantos, received 12 months co-funding from Daniel & Nina Carasso Foundation for developing a Spanish network of “[Ciudades por la Agroecología](#)”. Six cities formed the Steering Committee: Zaragoza, València, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Madrid, Lleida and Pamplona-Iruña. In early May, the network held a first physical meeting in Zaragoza, with the attendance of ten cities and meetings around three thematic work groups: 1) participatory processes and food governance, 2) promotion of agroecological entrepreneurship and access to land, and 3) promotion of local food delivery networks and infrastructures. The second physical meeting of the national Network was held in September 2017 in the city of València, at a seminar on Civil Society, Food and Sustainable Cities, which brought together delegations of 18 cities, including city officers and policymakers, but also private actors, civic organisations and scholars already working with member cities. The foundation document of the ‘Ciudades por la Agroecología’ Spanish network was signed a few weeks later.

### What do Cities for Agroecology need?

From the two networks it has become clear that cities, and especially city officers involved in sustainable food policies, need space for peer-to-peer exchange of knowledge and experience. As urban food policies are a relatively new issue for city governments, there is a lack of practical tools, such as rules, public support mechanisms or practical actions to be implemented. As many cities do not have a department for food policy, there is also a strong need to address how to introduce food affairs in current administrative structures. Finally, participants have recognised a need to learn from the pioneer experiences of others, and to develop innovative knowledge and lines of action in cooperation with locally-involved scholars and civic organisations.

The most valued topics for knowledge exchange have been the following:

- Creating and coordinating food logistics, supply networks and public infrastructure to improve local food systems sustainability, including sustainable public procurement

- Improving land planning and protecting agricultural land use
- Implementing participatory, strategic food plans
- Developing local food councils and enhancing relationships between local governments and economic and civic organisations
- Reducing food waste and promoting the circular economy

Political moments at the local administration level in Spain have opened new opportunities for innovative and sustainable policies on many topics, including food. The Spanish network has taken advantage of this momentum to formalise a resilient structure, capable of overcoming possible political changes in advance. Therefore, cities are making a strong effort to create a formal Association of Cities before the end of 2018. Fourteen city governments have already supported this step, and it is expected to be up to 20 by the end of 2017. Besides the need for practical tools and knowledge exchange there are other reasons to build a strong network. The need for a political window for sustainable food policies, supported by local, civic and private actors is probably the most urgent of them.

Each city involved in the networks is currently developing its own agenda, boosted by local action based on their specific background. Cities as Bristol, Liverpool, Barcelona, Valladolid and Vitoria-Gasteiz have been working on the participatory construction of Local Food Strategies. Alternatively, Bristol, Brugge or València have created Local Food Councils, whilst other cities such as Madrid and Córdoba have formalised civic engagement through MUFPP follow-up committees. Ghent, Zaragoza, Barcelona and València are involved in peri-urban farming social processes of revitalisation, focusing on organic farming. Some cities are trying to protect their agricultural lands through participatory land planning (Ghent, Barcelona). Some (Ghent, Zaragoza, València, Grenoble and Freiburg) are providing public infrastructure for local logistics and delivery. Finally, some others (Liverpool, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Madrid, Barcelona and Grenoble) are tackling food access inequality through public procurement coordinated with local agroecological food delivery chains.

### Challenges for agroecology-oriented urban food policies

The big picture shows a very active network, but there is still a lot to do. We rely on vast ongoing expertise from different cities but we also need to spread and disseminate this knowledge across Europe. Nevertheless, the European cities also share some common challenges that need to be addressed in the near future:

- Lack of specific departments (and therefore budget) for food policies within city governments; there is also a lack of competences on agriculture
- Austerity and externalisation policies within local administrations; this allows flexible alliances with civic organisations through consultation, but makes food policies politically weak and unstable
- Lack of agricultural land and decrease of agricultural holdings within urban areas

- Increasing food poverty, food deserts and disaffection, especially among low income social groups.
- Lack of metropolitan authorities in many urban areas, constraining the need for a shift from metropolitan-scale to City-Region Food Systems. Both food supply chains and administrative coordination need to be adapted to better scaling
- Special vulnerability to global change in urban areas
- Lack of awareness of cities' dependence on physical flows, both among policymakers and general citizenship; this affects food policy development
- The need for a deep cultural and value change that can support better food policies in more sustainable, equitable and fair urban societies.

### Conclusions

Agroecology provides a broad approach to sustainable urban food policies, going far beyond organic farming towards a perspective of food justice and ecosystem services provided by food systems. It points to City Region Food System as its optimal scale. Moreover, the political perspective of agroecology focuses on participatory, bottom-up governance processes which give a star role in the leadership of such policies to local civic and economic organisations, together with local authorities. Such an approach is taken by a number of European cities as a framework for developing ambitious and transformative agendas, with the aim to stabilise those policies within a context of political instability, austerity and global change.

Despite the great number of common challenges to be addressed, an increasing number of innovative urban policies and strategic tools are emerging. They adopt both the concept and the aims of transformative agroecology. Cities stress the need to come together to share their experiences. This gathering should provide the basis for creating, storing and disseminating new useful knowledge, leading the way for understanding and improving localised food systems. Furthermore, they need to gather more and more cities, in order to stabilise those networks and develop stronger tools for providing mutual support among them.

The agroecological approach needs to find its place among the growing number of networking processes on urban, sustainable food policies around the world. These networks present themselves as a complement for other, previous initiatives, especially those oriented to lobbying. Articulating the different city networks related to MUFPP, signatory cities, at different territorial scales, can also be a useful tool to strengthen such movement.

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