

A Hybrid Food Policy Board for the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area

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Amsterdam Metropolitan Area (MRA) houses two food councils: one, the Food Connect Foundation, represents provincial and municipal governments (minus the municipality of Amsterdam) and large companies in the region, while the other, Food Council MRA, is a network of citizens' initiatives and green entrepreneurs. The organisational divide mirrors a divide between the conventional food system and alternative food networks, but there are reasons for optimism about prospects for cooperation.

With 2.45 million inhabitants, the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area is a prosperous region, where consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the impact of their diet on public health, the environment and income distribution. Amsterdam Metropolitan Area covers 32 municipalities totalling 2,580 square kilometres, i.e. 6.2 % of the territory of the Netherlands. The city of Amsterdam is an economic and demographic magnet. Between 2020 and 2040, the population of the municipality of Amsterdam is expected to grow substantially from 880,000 to 1,042,200. In addition, the region also receives more than 10 million visitors every year (OIS, 2018).

The Amsterdam Metropolitan Area is an important food region in the Netherlands. Many large food processing companies are situated there such as Koninklijke Verkadé BV, Cargill, Ahold and ADM, as well as many start-ups. In the open space between the cities there is a large diversity of agricultural companies, with world players in seed potatoes and seed breeding located there. In IJmuiden there is a large fishing port with associated facilities such as a fish auction and processing companies. The region also houses a conveniently located large seaport and the largest airport in the country. Due to the presence of an amalgam of different cultures and a large student population, the MRA is a testing ground for new food concepts. There are many social initiatives in the field of nutrition.

Policy memorandums published by the provinces of Noord-Holland and Flevoland (2018) and the City of Amsterdam (2007, 2014) raise important questions and issues regarding food in the metropolitan region. How can the region feed the growing population in a sustainable way? How can the ecological footprint of the food supply be reduced? How can food-related traffic movements be limited? How can food waste be reduced? How can the



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health issue of overweight be addressed? How can awareness of sustainable handling of food be stimulated among consumers and governments?

Regional and local initiatives

In 2007, inspired by the example of other cities such as London and Toronto, Amsterdam City was one of the first regions in Europe to conceive a food vision under the motto "Testing Ground Amsterdam". The 2007 memorandum was endorsed by provincial, regional and municipal authorities, and although it was a top-down initiative by the City of Amsterdam, the food vision was applauded by citizens' initiatives and NGOs in the fields of environment, public health, education, allotment gardening and social work. Banks and companies also showed interest. Some civil initiatives and NGOs involved received modest subsidies from local governments for food education, farm visits and research.

After the successful implementation of the 2007-2012 Testing Ground Amsterdam pilot, in 2012 the Amsterdam City Council decided to draw up a new food vision building on the same foundations. The idea of the new vision was to offer more room for participation by civil initiatives. Among other things, the Testing Ground policy had sparked the establishment of a number of local food initiatives. Rabobank Amsterdam, a giant in the agri-food business, also joined in the debate. In 2014, a new food vision was adopted by the City of Amsterdam shortly before local elections. Due to a political landslide, however, the main political sponsors of the food policy in Amsterdam, the Green Left Party and the Labour Party, lost power. The new government simply cherry-picked certain parts of the vision, such as the policy to reduce overweight and support for edible green and community gardens in residential neighbourhoods, while other intentions, such as the establishment of a food council



Food Council MRA meeting in 2017. Photo by Arnold van der Valk

for the municipality, ended up on the shelf. After the most recent local elections in 2018, the political situation in the city changed drastically again, this time in favour of the left-wing parties. The new municipal government has announced that a food strategy will be published in 2019, building on the 2014 food vision. The strategy will introduce implementation devices at city and neighbourhood level.

The 2014 Amsterdam Food Vision was not endorsed by the provincial authorities of North-Holland and Flevoland, or by the other 32 municipalities in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area authority. MRA opted for a separate food policy and a regional Food Cluster under the aegis of the Amsterdam Economic Board. The Economic Board is incorporated in the regional authority and distributes resources from national government and the provinces for the promotion of the regional economy, transport and housing. The Food Cluster is an example of cooperation within a so-called triple helix association, a typically Dutch institutional arrangement including government, industry and educational institutions (1).

In the meantime, between 2007 and 2019, civil food initiatives spent most of their energy on achieving concrete goals, such as setting up communal gardens, creating food banks and organising exhibitions and conferences, rather than consulting and lobbying in the political circuit. In addition, between 2008 and 2014, many initiatives came to a halt due to budget cuts. The survivors focused on obtaining the remaining funds available from the government and philanthropic institutions. Many civil initiatives perceived like-minded parties as competitors in the struggle for scarce resources rather than as potential allies (Kuhlmann, 2017).

An emerging food council

In 2015 Edible Amsterdam together with the cultural centre Pakhuis de Zwijger managed to bring together a wide range of citizen food initiatives, NGOs, food start-ups and research institutes under the motto "Prototyping the Food Council". Sadly, this initiative collapsed due to a lack of financial resources and manpower.

In retrospect, citizens' initiatives in the City of Amsterdam and the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area only achieved their first substantial successes in 2013 and 2014, in a process of

citizen participation as a run-up to a Food Vision conceived by the City of Amsterdam. Unsalaries staff, such as the then chair of the Edible Amsterdam Platform, played a key role in this. They convened meetings of representatives of civic initiatives, NGOs and public officers, wrote draft texts and interacted with local politicians. One of the recommendations in the 2014 Amsterdam Food Vision was to create a Food Policy Board for maintaining international contacts. Despite that no action was taken by Amsterdam Council (2), but during the consultation process many personal contacts were established and new insights emerged. So far this fermentation process has resulted in the formation of two proto food councils in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area.

The birth of twins

In the course of 2016, 2017 and 2018, a network grew of individuals, NGOs, and businesses and advocacy groups who are committed to a transformation of the food system in the City of Amsterdam and the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area (Ilieva, 2017; Renting, Schermer & Rossi, 2012). Consisting of academics, students, civil servants and social entrepreneurs, the core group has found a home within the newly established Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Metropolitan Solutions (AMS).

In the spring of 2017, members of this advocacy group were invited by the province of North Holland to participate in the making of a new regional food vision for the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area (Thijssen, 2017). This was in line with the advocacy group's plans to organise an international conference on food policy in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Region and draw up a regional food charter. The province and the advocacy group joined forces and set to work on organising a conference 'Food flows in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area' with financial support from the provinces of Noord-Holland and Flevoland and from Rabobank Amsterdam. During the congress, which took place in December 2017 in Amsterdam, Food Council MRA was launched as a platform and a regional food manifesto was signed by the provinces, the bank and a number of companies and research institutions involved.

Food Council MRA is currently an informal network and has no legal status. In the Dutch legal system, the lack of legal status is an obstacle to receiving financial contributions

from government institutions. For the provinces and Rabobank this was a reason to prioritise the establishment of an alternative organisation fit to acquire legal status instantly and represent the regional food network. This was based on a 2012 Rabobank study on the shortcomings of the existing global food system and the need to think about regional food production. The title of this study, Food Connect, became the name of a foundation and a website. In the course of 2018, a quartermaster funded by the Province North Holland and Rabobank was appointed, and a series of actions were set in motion to (once again) put food on the agenda of the Amsterdam Economic Board and the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area. The Foundation Food Connect was launched in February 2019.

The role of Food Council MRA remained unclear for some time after. This has been due to lack of regular income and doubts about the size and legitimacy of the network. During 2018 and 2019 the founders of Food Council MRA, all volunteers, have devoted themselves in with great energy to strengthening the Council as a platform and as an action centre. An effort is being made to establish an association and a cooperative with legal status. The association accommodates the platform, which plays a role as an advisory body to the Food Connect Foundation. The cooperative provides a playing field for enterprising members looking to invest in sustainable projects.

Food Council MRA is perceived as one half of twin organisations. The Food Connect Foundation and the Food Council MRA Association were born at about the same time but are different. The Food Council's goal is to make the voice of citizens' initiatives and green entrepreneurs heard as a counterweight to the dominance of agri-business and government in the current food system.

A hybrid food policy council

The Amsterdam Metropolitan Area therefore currently falls within the remit of two food councils. One, the Food Connect Foundation is a vehicle of provincial governments and some municipalities (but not the Amsterdam municipality: the City of Amsterdam recently expressed intentions to establish a municipal food council). The other, Food Council MRA, functions as a network of citizens' initiatives and green entrepreneurs without legal status.

The dichotomy reflects the traditional distinction between the conventional industrial global food system and alternative regional and local niche food networks. Yet there is reason for optimism about cooperation in the future. This optimism is grounded on the expressions of support from both organisations for a radical regional food manifesto. Recently representatives of each organisation have taken up duties on the board of the other organisation. Exploratory talks between the boards of both organisations have identified common ground for setting up a shared advocacy platform, fundraising, common consultancy and the establishment of a regional community of food practice. Competition, distrust and exclusion are gradually turning into a basis of mutual trust, inclusion and cooperation. Within the extended network, an organic growth process is taking place under collective leadership. In the absence of substantial resources in both platforms, there is (still) no need for a hierarchical leadership and strict control – the more so for creativity, honesty, openness and enthusiasm (Van der Valk, 2018).

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Notes

1. The triple helix is a traditional notion in Dutch governance, reflecting traditional power structures, but it has raised criticism from civil society representatives because citizens' initiatives are excluded from the multi-stakeholder platform.
2. More recently, the 2019 provincial elections have created a new space for deliberation about some kind of integrated regional food policy. However, the City of Amsterdam, the most powerful player, has not yet joined the struggle for a regional food policy.