



What's Cooking in Berlin's Food Policy Kitchen?

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Meeting of the Ernährungsrat.

After years of silence on municipal food policy in Berlin, actors from civil society, academia, industry and the local senate have come together to discuss the current state and future of Berlin's food system, and are developing the city's first urban food strategy. The *Ernährungsrat Berlin* is the citizen-led urban food policy council working towards food democracy and re-localisation in the Berlin-Brandenburg region.

The beginning

In 2014, the working group *Stadt & Ernährung* (City & Food) was founded by a small group of people motivated by the lack of urban food policy in Berlin, and the fact that while many residents lack adequate access to good food, feeding this city of 3.5 million has negative impacts worldwide. Together, they set out to work towards a regional food system that works for everyone, consumers and producers alike, without causing irreversible damage to the planet, exploiting resources, or violating human rights.

The working group started to build a network of supporters, leading to a first unofficial *Ernährungsrat* Assembly in May 2015, and regular meetings that laid the groundwork for a civic alliance for food system transformation. From autumn 2015 onwards, a core group of people organised regular assemblies, developed a vision paper defining the goals and principles of the *Ernährungsrat* (1) and a constitution outlining the organisational structure and functioning (2). They also prepared the founding general assembly, where the first election for the speakers' circle took place.

Democratic principles guide the *Ernährungsrat*, which describes itself as an "open movement without official membership", a place where every citizen is welcome who wants to work towards sustainable transformation of the cities' food system.

On 22 April 2016, a little over two years after planting the initial seeds, the *Ernährungsrat Berlin* was formally established. More than 170 people came to the first general assembly meeting to inaugurate the food policy council and lobby for "a sustainable" food and agriculture policy in the region.^{1]}

The organisational structure

Early on, agreement was reached that the *Ernährungsrat* was to be a politically independent civil-society led food policy council, autonomous from the city administration and from business interests. The constitution establishes three bodies: 1) the general assembly, 2) the speakers' circle and 3) the working groups (3).

The general assembly is the highest and most public body, and usually meets twice a year, to discuss political demands and agree upon goals. The speakers' circle is made up of 8-14 people who are elected every two years; their task is to follow current debates in food policy, develop the *Ernährungsrat* positions, initiate activities, and take urgent decisions that cannot wait until the next general assembly. The speakers' circle also meets regularly with relevant departments at the city administration and coordinates the search for funding.

1] The German word "zukunftsfit" is used, which can be translated to either sustainable or viable. The literal translation would be "fit for the future".

Working groups can be established on whatever issues active participants want to deal with, but generally represent the council's priorities. Working groups can work independently from the speakers' circle, but we find that those groups which include speakers and/or a coordinator have functioned better than those without. This is due to the challenges of ensuring long-term commitment and clarity of aims among a shifting group of constituents.

The *Ernährungsrat* began as an open grass-roots movement without formal membership. This lack of a legal status meant that the *Ernährungsrat* could not apply for funding. And it soon became clear that coordinating a movement could not be done with voluntary labour alone. A small non-profit organisation was thus installed to apply for funds that would pay for a coordinator and budget for activities. Participation in the council remains open to everyone.

Participation and inclusion

The council sees itself as a platform for Berlin's civil society and strives to include the voices of diverse stakeholders in the city's food system. The general assembly is open to anyone who "deals with food", which includes anyone who eats. The *Ernährungsrat* acknowledges that it has been a challenge to recruit artisanal food producers and other small food enterprises, because they often lack time to participate or awareness of the initiative.

The *Ernährungsrat* also struggles with the inclusion of socio-economically disadvantaged groups and minorities. Those attending general assemblies and the membership of the speakers' circle are largely white, middle-class, and with an academic background. The *Ernährungsrat* is actively trying to reach out to groups whose voices are marginalised both in the food system itself and in alliances to transform the food system. They advocate a just food system – one where access to adequate, sustainably produced and culturally appropriate food does not depend on income, education, citizenship or ethnicity. For this to become reality, the *Ernährungsrat* believes that the voices of disadvantaged groups need to be included in discussions about food system change, otherwise it is unlikely that an alternative food system will meet their needs.

Ernährungsrat – outcomes

The work of the still young *Ernährungsrat* in Berlin has led to a number of fruitful outcomes, including the Catalogue of Demands (nine action fields and numerous specific measures for food system change); two community food centres; and the organisation of the Regional Week. In the three years since its formation, the *Ernährungsrat* has become a central contact point for politics and media on Berlin food policy. Together with the Cologne food policy council, they represent the first German-speaking food policy councils and help to inspire others. Across Germany and neighbouring countries, cities and small towns have initiated their own councils or are in the process of doing so. These activities are supported by the *Netzwerk der Ernährungsräte*, a network of German-speaking food policy councils (including Berlin) whose motto is "Food democracy now!".

Relationship – Berlin Senate and *Ernährungsrat*

Despite the very positive developments around food policy in Berlin, the relationship between the *Ernährungsrat* and the senate remains informal. This differs from other cities, where the food policy council might receive institutional support from the city or be part of the administration. The *Ernährungsrat* Berlin continues to run primarily on volunteers, without staffing, workspace, or institutional support from the city. The senate recognises and values the much-needed expertise of the *Ernährungsrat* lobby-group, but there are no formal ties between the two.

The local context – green, politicised and entrepreneurial

Berlin is a special place for developing urban food policy. The city has a well-connected food scene and the urban gardening, organic and anti-food waste movements have been active for many years. Furthermore, the capital is a hub for entrepreneurs and an attractive destination for international creatives. Berlin is also the "organic consumer capital" of Europe and boasts 200+ organic shops and supermarkets. The *Ernährungsrat* Berlin grew out these circumstances and aims at bringing together the full range of civil-society and food policy actors who are working for food systems transformation.

Around the same time as the initiation of the *Ernährungsrat* Berlin, the former state secretary for consumer protection signed the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP), committing Berlin to undertake measures for a sustainable food system transformation. As a first act a municipal food council was established, the *Forum für gutes Essen* (Forum for good food). Representatives of the *Ernährungsrat* Berlin attended the events of the Forum as well, but were critical of the lack of transparency, the exclusive membership, and the lack of a clear mission for cross-departmental food system transformation.

In 2016, a new coalition government opened up new possibilities for working together on municipal food policies. The Green Party was voted into the coalition with political champions enthusiastically pushing food policy issues onto the agenda. The coalition agreement includes a clear commitment to collaborate with the *Ernährungsrat* Berlin on developing a food strategy as a first step towards an urban food strategy. In the senate department responsible for justice, consumer protection and anti-discrimination, the Green senator and the state secretary in charge of the subject are on the lookout for and are open to urban food policy proposals. While the work of the *Forum für gutes Essen* tailed off, the collaboration between senate and *Ernährungsrat* Berlin has intensified.

Challenges and lessons learnt

The insistence on independence seems to cut both ways. Acquiring funding is a major challenge, especially long-term funding instead of the current project-based funding for which annual applications and presentable results are required. But the *Ernährungsrat* Berlin embraces its role of independent watchdog, putting pressure on the government and reminding the senate to comply with their obligations under the MUFPP, as well as promises made in the election campaign and ensuing coalition agreement. Their independence makes them free to advise the senate, but also to criticise approaches and outcomes – even though the majority of their project-funding comes from the senate.

The autonomous and grass-roots structure of the *Ernährungsrat* means that their existence is not dependent on the government coalition in power. In the current political landscape, the *Ernährungsrat* Berlin has been able to use windows of opportunity to put food policy on the agenda. But there is no certainty that the next government will view food policy as favourably. After the next elections in 2021, an independent food policy watchdog might be more needed than ever. While autonomy comes with financial insecurity, the *Ernährungsrat* has opted to diversify their funding sources (e.g. charitable trusts, crowdfunding, private donors), rather than become more institutionalised in the local government.

The challenge of inclusion and representation remains a key concern for the group. To ensure diversity in their structure and the perspectives, the *Ernährungsrat* has conducted direct outreach to marginalised groups and is currently developing an active outreach strategy with a diversity coach. In retrospect, the coordinator of the group says, if she could do all it over again, she would engage a more diverse group of people from the very beginning. Once a homogenous, white, academic core group has established itself to set up a food policy council and define its aims, it becomes more and more challenging to include a diversity of individuals and perspectives. This is a challenge for alternative food movements across the global north (4), where anti-racist strategies are critical for challenging the reproduction of exclusionary white spaces.

Another big challenge for the *Ernährungsrat* is to keep chaos at bay and existing structures effective. The largely voluntary base means that there is regular turnover of active volunteers, working groups are set up but fade out due to lack of regular participation, and time-consuming debates are never finished or – sometimes – repeated a few months after a “final” decision has been taken. One reason the *Ernährungsrat* has so far weathered these challenges is that from the beginning, a coordinator managed contacts and timelines, and kept different working strands together. Furthermore, the *Ernährungsrat* constantly evaluates the different formats to engage participants and regularly adapts them in order to make them more effective and motivating. Only recently for example, a regular “project and campaigns workshop” organised and led by the coordinators was set up, replacing some of the self-organised working groups.

Although the food policy council in Berlin is still very young compared to others in North America, Brazil or England, and insists on their independence from the government, they have already established themselves as a competent partner and actor in the transformation process of Berlin’s food systems. Food democracy, which is at the core of the agenda, stands for a broad inclusion of all, and this is what the *Ernährungsrat* will continue to strive for: to be a representative of the city’s diverse and unique civil society and to make their voices heard.

Previous research on urban food policy councils suggests that the key to “success” is becoming embedded in municipal institutions, thereby gaining secure funding and staff, access to policy makers, and influence across city departments with different priorities (5). However, this is not the path that Berlin is following. Food politics in Berlin will always belong to the grass roots. Municipal-led attempts at food policy in Berlin have largely failed. It will be an agile and resilient organisation that can engage a diversity of stakeholders, weather changes in the political tides, and remain a vital advocate and critical watchdog for civil society. The development and structure of food policy councils should be sensitive to the local context, and value the local knowledge, engagement practices, and passions that are being nurtured in grass-roots spaces. While this generates (at times unwieldy) complexity, we view this complexity as a source of resilience.

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4. Slocum, R. (2007). Whiteness, space and alternative food practice. *Geoforum*, 38(3), 520-533.
5. MacRae, R., & Donahue, K. (2013). Municipal food policy entrepreneurs: A preliminary analysis of how Canadian cities and regional districts are involved in food system change. Toronto Food Policy Council.

More info:

- Ernährungsrat Berlin’s webpage: www.ernaehrungsrat-berlin.de/
- Senate administration consumer protection webpage: www.berlin.de/sen/verbraucherschutz/