

Toronto food governance in flux

Jess Halliday

The recent disbanding of Toronto Food Strategy team and de-funding of the Toronto Food Policy Council demonstrates that even the most long-established, apparently institutionalised food governance structures are vulnerable to circumstantial change, such as pressures from the pandemic and other emergencies, the threat of budget cuts, as well as shifting political priorities when a new provincial leader takes office.

The Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) was established in 1991 as a sub-committee of the Toronto Board of Health, at a time when preventative public health was gaining traction among senior officers who saw the importance of including food in public health policy.

Over the next 30 years the TFPC gave voice to all food interests in the city, across multiple sectors. It served to connect people from the food, farming and community sectors to develop innovative policies and projects to support a healthy sustainable food system. In 2011 the Toronto Food Strategy was launched, with the aim of integrating food-related work into the objectives of all city government departments. A Toronto Food Strategy team of eight was established within Toronto Public Health.

In 2019, however, the Provincial Government – under Premier Doug Ford – announced plans to cut Can\$1 billion in funding to Toronto Public Health over the coming decade. Among wider impacts on the work of Toronto Public Health, the plans were acknowledged to pose a direct threat to the TFPC, several food and nutrition programmes, and to the food strategy team.

These stringent financial cuts did not become reality, yet the announcement caused significant upheaval within Toronto Public Health and consternation among TPFC members. At the same time, a change in leadership of Toronto Public Health led to shifting priorities, including less focus on healthy public policy and the food systems work. Within this context, the Toronto Food Strategy team dwindled as staff retired or left to take up new employment outside of the City of Toronto.

When COVID-19 hit in early 2020, city leadership called on charities to lead the emergency food response and did not immediately use the expertise, research and analysis of the TFPC and the Toronto Food Strategy team. In other words, Toronto, like many cities the world over, was lacking an effective emergency food plan. All Toronto Public Health resources were deployed to pandemic response. While this was deemed essential at the time, it sealed the demise of the food strategy and led to the defunding of the TFPC.

As of early 2022, new food systems initiatives have taken root. For example, City Council endorsed and funded a Black Food Sovereignty Plan to address chronic food insecurity, anti-Black racism, and structural inequities in Toronto's food system and which recognized the racial inequities of the food system. The TFPC no longer meets regularly although the long history, passion and expertise of TFPC members and supporters will likely result in some other form of food policy advocacy in the City of Toronto in the medium to long term.

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Forthcoming: Routledge Handbook of Urban Food Governance

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The last twenty years have witnessed a soaring academic and applied interest in governing urban food systems. This interest is the result of a number of intersecting issues, including: dissatisfaction with the food system and its economic, health, ecological and social impacts;

the growing awareness around the complexity of food and therefore the need to adopt a systems thinking approach; increased role of cities in shaping cultural discourses and global socio-ecological dynamics; and the emergence of novel co-governance approaches where civil

society, the public and private sector come together to make decisions.

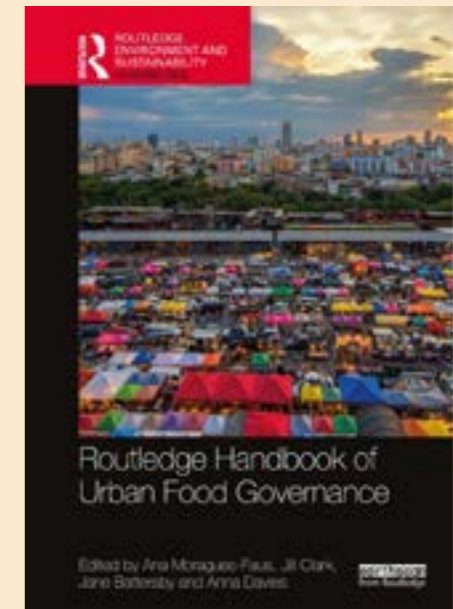
These overlapping issues have led to a diversity of theoretical and practical approaches to study urban food governance, which largely remain disconnected. The historic lack of 'ownership' of urban food governance by any single department of state and any single external stakeholder, as well as its study from different academic disciplines, has enabled the field to be particularly innovative, dynamic and responsive to new global and local challenges – such as climate change or geopolitical restructuring. While there has been an upsurge in interest, urban food system governance is not new, and historic governance of food systems has in many ways shaped the wider urban form and contemporary urban dynamics.

In this context, the Routledge Handbook of Urban Food Governance aims to unpack the power of urban food governance and its capacity to affect lives through the transformation of cities and the global food system. The peer-reviewed Handbook is the first collection to reflect and compile the currently dispersed histories, concepts and practices involved in the increasingly popular field of urban food governance. This critical and collective exercise contributes to reassessing the role of cities in delivering sustainability and food security outcomes, and provides refreshed theoretical and practical tools to understand and transform urban food governance to enact more sustainable and just futures.

The Handbook is structured in five sections. The first section focuses on histories of urban food governance to trace the historical roots of current dynamics and provides an impetus for the critical lens on urban food governance threaded through the handbook.

The second section presents a broad overview of the different frames, theories and concepts that have informed urban food governance scholarship. Section three builds on the foundation of the first two sections to engage with the practice of urban food governance by analysing plans, policies and programmes implemented in different contexts. Section four presents current knowledge on how urban food governance involves different agencies that operate across scales and sectors. Section five asks key authors in the field what the future of urban food governance holds in the midst of pressing societal and environmental challenges. In order to compile state of the art knowledge, the Handbook of Urban Food Governance draws on

academics' and practitioners' knowledge, and features studies from established and emerging scholars from different geographies. The Handbook is a collective effort developed in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and as the world faces critical ecological and social emergencies. As editors, we are deeply grateful to all contributors for their time and effort in developing this unique compilation of knowledge which constitute an essential guide to understanding, reflecting and actively engaging with urban food governance and its transformative potential.



The Routledge Handbook of Urban Food Governance will be published in October 2022. For more information: <https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Handbook-of-Urban-Food-Governance/Moragues-Faus-Clark-Battersby-Davies/p/book/9780367518004>

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