

# Striving For Sustainable, Inclusive And Resilient Food Systems

## Lessons from Rome and IURC Urban Leaders

In collaboration with the region of Anci-Lazio - Rome and its partners, the IURC-NA programme organized a thematic event focused on the leadership of cities to create more inclusive, resilient and sustainable urban food systems. On October 16-17, 16 delegates from cities in Canada, the United States, and Europe gathered to learn about the ambitious and comprehensive undertaking of the Anci-Lazio - Rome region to enhance access to affordable and nutritious food and support the viability of a regional

agricultural system. Participants also shared their own experiences in establishing governance and regulations, mobilizing stakeholders, educating communities, supporting producers, and cultural practices to create more sustainable and resilient food systems. In doing so, participants also reflected on how they can connect and collaborate with each other to advance their own work on local or regional food systems.

### Strategic policies, tools and initiatives for a sustainable food system in the European Union

The European Union's (EU) strategy for maintaining a reliable and accessible food supply through sustainable agricultural practices is grounded in key frameworks such as the [Common Agricultural Policy](#) (CAP). The CAP advances objectives including food security, stable farm incomes, environmental stewardship, and the development of rural communities. The [Farm to Fork Strategy](#) launched in 2020, part of the [European Green Deal](#), advances a fair and sustainable food system while the [EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030](#) and the [European Climate Law](#) further promote biodiversity and climate resilience in farming.

Aligned with its foundational policies, the Sustainable Food Systems Framework Initiative plays a pivotal role in shaping the future development of Europe's food systems. Key financial instruments, including the European Regional Development Fund, Cohesion Fund, and Horizon Europe, provide critical support for sustainable agricultural practices and sector-wide innovation. The [Food 2030 initiative](#) is the EU's main research and innovation framework for promoting sustainable, healthy, and inclusive food systems. It uses a multi-stakeholder approach across the entire food value chain, from production to waste management. A recent report [Shaping the future of food research and innovation](#) was commissioned

to identify gaps and opportunities and recommend improvements for a future program.

This comprehensive approach has informed the establishment of the Horizon Europe Sustainable Food Systems Partnership for People, Planet and Climate and directly contributes to the aims of the EU Mission: A Soil Deal for Europe. Many projects are supporting new regional and urban approaches. For example, the [EU's Urban Agenda Food Partnership](#) enables cities to support sustainable food systems. Globally, the [Milan Urban Food Policy Pact](#) engages cities in efforts to share and promote best practices for food system sustainability. These and other collective initiatives and targeted projects are essential for driving the transformation towards sustainable agriculture and resilient food systems in Europe.

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## Rome Food Policy: Community activism, political engagement and multistakeholder governance to transform the region's food system



**Cities must stop being passive centers of consumption and become active agents of change**

**Sabrina Alfonso,**  
**Vice-Mayor,**  
**City of Rome**



Rome made a commitment to develop an integrated food policy under the [Milan Urban Food Policy Pact](#), a global initiative which it signed in 2016. In 2018, a group of stakeholders mobilized their efforts to raise awareness and explore solutions, leading to the identification of gaps and priority areas for intervention. The mapping and analysis of Rome's food system provided a framework for development of the integrated food policy by giving a better understanding of challenges, key issues to address and the priority actions that need to be taken by the city and its network. The **Food Atlas** served as an initial step in creating a collective path involving all 121 municipalities within the metropolitan area.

In 2021, the city of Rome adopted a Food Policy for metropolitan Rome, establishing three key instruments: the **Food Council**, the **Food Plan**, and the **Technical Office**, which is responsible for implementing the food policy. This resolution represented a "landmark achievement of a bottom-up process involving over 50 organisations, that sought to secure buy-in from policy makers to develop an integrated food policy that both addresses food-related challenges and leverages existing food system strengths to help tackle other urban challenges"<sup>1</sup>.

**The conceptual framework behind the Rome food policy process is the city-region food system approach** referring to a large urban centre or conglomeration of smaller urban centres and their surrounding peri-urban region and rural hinterland. The City-Region Food System (CRFS) seeks to convene all the actors, processes and relationships that are involved in food production, processing, distribution and consumption in the defined area and foster linkages across key challenges such as food security, economic development, water and waste management, energy, transport, health, climate change, governance and spatial planning.

### Proposal and priority areas

The food system mapping identified ten priority areas for action:

1. Access to land, water and agro-biodiversity
2. Support for sustainable agriculture, organic farming and agro-ecology
3. Short supply chains and local markets
4. Supply chain integration & green public procurement
5. Labelling & traceability of supply chains
6. Waste management, food redistribution, recovery of surpluses
7. Promotion of multi-functionality
8. Food & environmental education
9. Curbing land consumption and degradation
10. Resilience planning: green infrastructures and services

<sup>1</sup> [www.foodactioncities.org/case-studies/bottom-up](http://www.foodactioncities.org/case-studies/bottom-up)

In recent years, a succession of events (the pandemic, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine) and mounting climate stresses among others, have exposed the vulnerabilities of the regional food system and eroded the relationship between the consumers and their food sources. The work of the Food Council in implementing the Food Policy is critical in addressing these vulnerabilities.

**The Food Policy Council** consists of non-governmental stakeholders along with representatives from pertinent municipal departments. Characterised by inclusive governance and collaborative frameworks, Rome's Food Policy is designed to promote sustainability, embed circular economy principles, and strengthen resilience within the city's food system.

The Council has organised its work according to seven directing issue tables that reflect the goals of the resolution: (i) food governance, (ii) access to resources, local production and agroecology, (iii) markets, local food and logistics, (iv) solidarity economy and alternative food networks, (v) combating food waste and poverty, (vi) school catering, public procurement and food education, and (vii) food culture, catering and food processing. The City of Rome for its part works on developing tools and supporting local boroughs' priorities. Municipal leverage includes: procurement, regulations and policy framework, financial tools and incentives, leadership by examples and supporting social organisations and business ecosystems.

## Key Messages

- + A genuine food policy must include a focus on supporting local agriculture at its core.
- + Treating food as a public good prevents reliance solely on market forces, which may overlook wellbeing and environmental sustainability.
- + While long-term change takes time, we can begin by:

- Strengthening local supply chains
- Investing in processing and distribution infrastructure to support farmers
- Linking agriculture to local markets like restaurants, schools, and public institutions
- Expanding community-supported agriculture and farmers markets
- Including local and organic products in school and public tenders
- Using public lands as incubators to train and support new farmers with mentorship and credit access

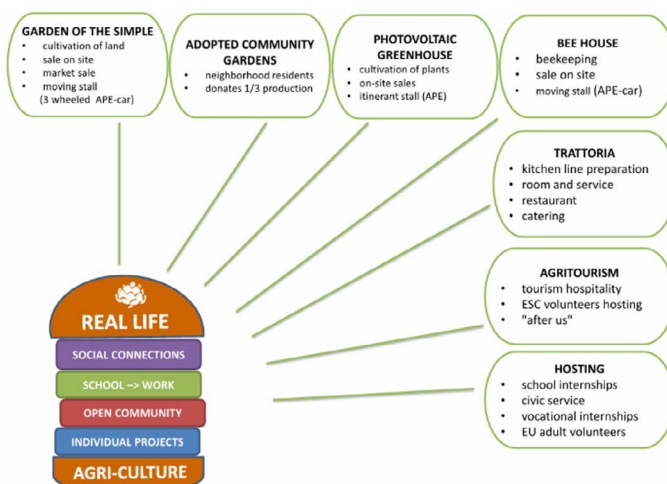
- + An effective food policy should integrate **land, training, local production, public procurement, and fair markets.**

## Field visits highlights

### Guiseppe Garibaldi:

#### Social Integrated Agricultural Cooperative

Founded in 2010, the **Garibaldi cooperative** is owned by students with autism spectrum disorder and their families. It is a farm, type B cooperative, and a workplace for its members. Members also receive individualised support they need in order to be productive through educational operators and peer mediators paid for by each family. The site has diverse operations (Figure 1) that are multidisciplinary and multidimensional that contribute to productive activities, social relationships, active inclusion, and quality of life. The cooperative is an innovative model of social integration and urban agriculture. Participants experienced a delicious three-course luncheon at the cooperative's restaurant operated by its members.



Source: Presentation by Andrea Messori, Replay Network



Delegates from the EU, US, and Canada visiting the Garibaldi Cooperative on October 17th, 2025. Photo by Blerina Qerimi and Jacinthe Seguin



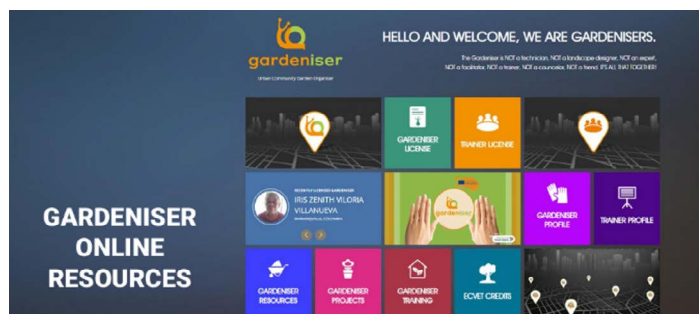
## Urban Community Gardens as a common good

Rome is home to a network of community gardens, known as Orti in Comune. Through the European project [RU:RBAN 2nd wave](#), a proposal for new regulations is being considered through various deliberative processes (<https://gardeniser.eu/en/resources/romes-urban-community-gardens-regulation-proposal>). Land is usually entrusted to community gardens free of charge, and projects engage the local community in defining its own targets and how it will operate, focusing on sustainable urbanisation, increased community resilience, intergenerational dialogue, and intercultural dialogue.

**Urban Community Gardens** are accessible spaces that foster neighbourhood interaction, self-governance, and a sense of community. While they promote sharing and learning, they tend to be less efficient than commercial agriculture due to higher water use, faster tool wear, limited expertise, and sometimes unsuitable crop choices. In an urban community garden, the Gardeniser (garden + organiser) plays a supportive and mediating role, accompanying the development of actions for gardeners and the purposeful interaction with citizens, external groups engaged in the area, and nearby institutions.



Delegates from the EU countries, United States and Canada visiting the Garibaldi Cooperative on October 17th, 2025. Photos by Jacinthe Sequin.



Source: <https://gardeniser.eu/en/toolbox-urban-gardens#>

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**In the community garden, for every square meter of land cultivated by an individual gardener, many other people get activated, who cultivate positive, social, educational, cultural and environmental externalities.**

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**Andrea Messori,**  
REPLAY Network

## Conclusions

Local governments play a pivotal role in supporting the establishment and functioning of community gardens. By providing effective guidance and coordination, they help transform these gardens into vibrant hubs that embody the city's public policies and social objectives. As shown in Rome, this is achieved through fostering active citizen participation, ensuring that community members have a meaningful role in shaping the direction and activities of their local gardens.

An essential responsibility for local authorities is to act as guarantors for community organisations wishing to invest in the development of urban community gardens and facilitating access to land in the city to establish community gardens. This involves not only safeguarding the interests of these organisations but also enabling the growth and sustainability of the gardens themselves. By fulfilling this role, local governments help create a supportive environment in which community gardens can thrive and contribute to broader urban goals.

## Lessons from food policy urban leaders

The contribution of delegates from 16 cities during the event revealed a wide range of local government practices and innovations related to food policies, urban agriculture, and organic waste management. Some are single-purpose initiatives, while others involve comprehensive strategies connecting social goals to environmental, land use, and economic plans and actions. While intersectoral and food chain approaches involve systems that can operate beyond the city-region, local governments are showing their ability and unique role in fostering connections and collaborations that support local agriculture and deliver positive social and environmental outcomes.

### Food strategies & goals

- **Coimbra, Portugal**, developed a comprehensive Food Strategy for 2022-2030 that touches on sustainability, access to health foods, cultural heritage and education in schools.
- **Barcelona Metropolitan Area, Spain**, carried out several studies (2014-19) before creating their 1st Metropolitan Food Policy Action Plan from **2021-2023 (7 pillars, 32 actions) followed by their second plan 2025-2027 (5 pillars, 28 lines of action). The scope of their work, engagement of the food sector and their matrix with 50 indicators is among the most extensive by a metropolitan area.**
- **Austin Texas, the Travis County Food Plan** adopted in 2024 was co-created through community engagement and sets clear goals and strategies to move towards a more equitable, sustainable and resilient food system. Their focus is (1) access to food and affordability, and; (2) local food production and agriculture.
- **Rome, Italy adopted its Food Plan in 2022** including 10 lines of action and a Technical Office to support implementation.
- **Bergamo, Italy** adopted the **Bergamo Food Policy Manifesto (2023)** and a powerful new **Land Use Plan (2025)** created a green belt surrounding the city with 800 000 m2 of agricultural areas.
- **Toronto, Canada** was an early adopter of a **Food Policy in 1991** which led to a range of programs spread across many city departments, including those addressing food insecurity. Interest is growing to update **Toronto's Food Charter**.

### Multistakeholder engagement & governance

- **Coimbra's** Food Strategy is managed by an **Intermunicipal Executive Secretariat**, supervised by the Intermunicipal Council composed of 19 Mayors of the Region.
- **Atlanta, USA**, is building on a suite of programs dating back to 2007 and engaging stakeholders to define Atlanta's **Food Future**. The extensive collaboration involving Community Listening Sessions and consultation are defining the next steps for the establishment of the future food council.
- **Austin's Food Plan** relied on **extensive participatory process** and involves a well coordinated group of actors: consultants and city staff in designing, a community advisory community to guide and approve, the city & county executive leadership to review and course correct and the Austing Travis County Policy Board to support and advise.
- **Pittsburgh, USA** has a robust nonprofit community that monitors indicators (e.g., the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council, Grow PGH, and multiple foundations).
- **Rome, Italy** implements its Food Policy through a multistakeholder **Food Council** that is supported by a set of 6 issue table committees.

### Strategic policies & community investments

- **San Francisco, USA**, is also a pioneer of food related policies and programs since the 2000s. Their **Edible Food Recovery Law (2024)** and **Climate Action Plan & Zero Waste Targets (2019)** have provided education and technical assistance helping fund partnerships between generators and food recovery organizations. The Local Directive 2009 "Healthy and Sustainable Food for San Francisco" has driven **hospitals and jails to adopt the Good Food Purchasing Standards and sets baseline targets**.
- **Nanaimo, Canada** adopted strategic directions for food security in 2022. **The policy** supports sustainable food systems, local food production, access to healthy food and integration of food systems into community planning.
- In **Albuquerque, USA**, political commitment led to the Albuquerque Food and Agriculture Action Plan (2019) and the creation of a **Local Agricultural Coordinator** who connects urban agriculture networks, activates vacant lots, and provides technical support to community gardens and composting initiatives.
- In **Toronto**, small investments in Community Engagement and Economic Development Gardens have transformed unused outdoor space into community-drive initiatives that build skills, generate income, reduce social isolation, improve food security and contribute to local sustainable food system.
- In **St. John's, Canada**, the Healthy City Strategy prioritizes equitable access to services and community wellbeing, creating opportunities for food security actions and cross-sector collaboration. It provided space and supported partnerships with local non-profits focused on food and poverty reduction (Food First NL, Stella's Circle), enabling hub-style service delivery and program coordination.
- **Granada, Spain** first created a **network of leisure gardens** to provide contact with nature and healthy food production for the elderly which grew in popularity and now is also targeting children learning and other social groups.

### Food education and school programs

- **Umea, Sweden** implemented the **SchoolFood4Change** project to support local producers and create a long-term transition to healthy and sustainable eating habits among children and young people. **Their goal is 50% organic and 50% local food in public canteens** and their measures are supported by empirical data and monitored results.
- **The Good Canteen project in Bergamo**, as part of the European Food Trails Project is working to increase local food products in school canteens and raise awareness of the **ecological food footprint**. The **Green Menu** logo promoted local products.
- In **Albuquerque**, pilot programs to reduce food waste and support composting in schools are being implemented.
- In **Braga, Portugal** the 22nd edition of the Map for Healthy and Sustainable Eating promotes local, seasonal and sustainable foods and features recipes from a local chef. The tool is integrated into schools, municipal events and family education.
- In **Sofia, Bulgaria**, in the central areas of the city, it established a commercial **food waste collection system** involving specialized containers that are serviced on a schedule. The collected food waste is then transported to the municipal biological treatment plant where it undergoes anaerobic digestion to produce biogas.
- **GZM, Poland** began talking about food policy with municipalities and a focus has been to reduce the amount of biodegradable waste. We cooperate by sharing best practices with other cities in Poland (f.e. Kraków, Wrocław) that have already introduced food policies, as well as with the GRUNT Food Strategy Institute from Warszawa.

### Land-use actions and agriculture support

- In **Pittsburgh, USA**, the City is seeking input on the potential expansion of **city greenways** to reflect how the community envisions that these new green spaces should be utilized including orchard and community gardens.
- In **Nanaimo**, the **Island Roots Market Coop operates year-round at Beban Park** and includes a learning garden, supports over 38 vendors, and fosters community engagement. In 2023, it welcomed 22,900 visitors and generated \$1.5M in economic impact. The seasonal Cedar Farmers Market added \$3.6M in impact and 58,900 visits.
- **Austin, USA** is developing **Asset Maps in support of local agriculture initiatives** and engaging local farmers through focus groups as a first step in their Travis County Food Plan.
- In **St. John's**, **O'Brien Farm serves as an agricultural incubator** through its New Found Farmers program, giving new-entrant farmers access to land, mentorship, equipment and supports to help them grow local food and start up farming enterprises.
- **Granada** is leading a **regreening strategy** to connect green spaces with urban neighbourhoods, creating nature corridors, a green city perimeter, new innovative public spaces and neighbourhood planting education.



## Reflections on these shared practices and lessons from Rome

- 1. Food policies are not just about local agriculture but about equity, inclusion, health and dignity:** The right to food is as much about quality of food and dignity as it is about quantity of food; the experience of Rome and others reinforced the fundamental role of food and food production in social equity, community building, climate mitigation/adaptation, environmental stewardship, economic development & equity.
- 2. Strategies and food plans guide cities and bring stakeholders together:** Engagement is at the core of all strategies and a key ingredient for sustainable implementation. There were many different models of engagement, partnerships and co-creation between local governments and civil society that can serve as examples and inspiration.
- 3. Cities play many roles: creating visions, recognizing the needs of underserved populations, fostering bonds and networks, providing access, supporting community groups, rallying businesses, protecting land, and monitoring change, among others.** Cities recognised their shared challenges. The exchange of information between cities inspired new ideas and provided tools that can be adapted to different circumstances.
- 4. Cities must invest in land use policies to support regional production and urban agriculture.** Some cities are inspired by their zero land consumption as a concept/goal, and others by programs to repurpose vacant lots, support community gardens, local infrastructure, and markets.
- 5. Education creates bonds in the community - from nutrition to food waste to local agriculture and cultural practices.** Community gardens can transform attitudes and approaches to food within a community, serving as a learning and networking hub. School education programs are important channels for learning about local food production, food culture, and nutrition.
- 6. Importance of monitoring and collecting real data to support this long-term agenda.** Some monitoring and measurement are starting to emerge, but creative solutions to evaluating food and agriculture policy work need to be expanded and shared.





## Next Steps

The presentations and exchanges during the event inspired participants to continue their efforts. City delegates reflected on actionable solutions and next steps:

• **Follow-up with IURC peer cities on specific initiatives to help advance one's own work;**

- Participants will reach out to see how best to engage and integrate food and urban gardens in their urban forest masterplan;
- San Francisco will share its refuse collection program details with peers such as representatives from Austin and Albuquerque;

• **Push policy, ideas, or new goals forward; for example:**

- Delegates will investigate opportunities for engagement such as the creation of a community advisory committee;
- Cities will do a deeper analysis of governance options, such as the creation of a Food Council to support the implementation of their own food strategy;

• **Sharing key takeaways, learnings, and new contacts with unit colleagues and other city departments. For example,**

- Participants will plan a lunch and learn event for colleagues to share key learning and practices from IURC peers
- Delegates will reach out to colleagues working on the upcoming Food Summit to set ambitious goals, such as the local food & local agricultural support.

• **Explore a new project based on the exchanges, for example,**

- Cities will evaluate implementing the Gardenizer model in their city;
- They will explore how the city can develop a rent-a-lot program for community gardens;
- And examine opportunities for food education and programs for children;

• **Reach out to local stakeholders to explore new ideas. For example,**

- Italian peers will reach out to creative cities of gastronomy in the region to enquire about their food policies;
- And explore how to engage all citizens in community gardens.

