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# The blooming of local food councils across Europe and the Americas: Insights on an emerging literature and its divides

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## ABSTRACT

Local food councils (LFCs) have been studied through different lenses and different disciplines across the social sciences since their beginning in the 1980s in North America. Given their worldwide expansion, there is a need to assess the current state of knowledge on these local food councils and the potential differences between the North American literature and experiences and those anchored in other contexts, namely Europe and Brazil where they are also quite present. Based on a focused literature review, this paper suggests three analytical entrees that allow for the characterisation of research on local food councils: (i) their functions, in relation to their origins and degrees of institutionalisation; (ii) the way they address the participation and inclusion of various actors of the agri-food system, and especially of local communities and civil society and (iii) their framing of the agri-food transitions. This characterisation gives a richer view of the diversity of local food systems, beyond the most well-known cases of North American food policy councils, which results in a new typology of these experiences, articulating their origins, degrees of institutionalisation and their sets of functions (advising, advocating for change, experimenting, networking, etc.). Moreover, our analysis shows that the way local food councils address the issues of participation and inclusion and frame the agri-food transitions as well as their functions depend upon their specific trajectories and national contexts, and that the way these aspects are tackled by the literature differs across the three world regions included in our review (North America, Brazil and Europe). We overall observe a persistent lack of consideration of power relations and imbalances, of the right to food as well as of systemic perspectives to agri-food transitions. This minimizes local food councils' potential for promoting and acting to a thick food democracy and for supporting just ecological transitions. Finally, we identify some priorities for further research and action-research such as the need to include more “informal” as well as more rural cases and identify their specificities.

## 1. Introduction

The negative impacts of agro-industrial food systems, the urgent need to radically change production and consumption practices in the face of current ecological crises and of climate change are now widely acknowledged. Increasingly and in diverse national contexts, agri-food transitions are becoming key political and collective issues. While agriculture has long been a strategic economic and policy field and thus a proper public “thing” (*res publica*), food remained something considered mundane, ordinary, private, but is now garnering similar attention (Fouilleux and Michel, 2020). There are diverse forms of politicisation of agri-food issues, which all converge to this change in status: alternative

food networks that offer concrete ways to change both production and consumption practices, old and new social movements that develop “conscientisation” and lobbying actions, specific policies that are set up by governments at different scales etc. There is also a growing institutionalisation of agri-food issues that can be observed in various countries, taking different forms, aligning with diverse policy frameworks, and responding to pressure from social movements. These developments can be exemplified – amongst a diversity of situations - by a devoted public scheme called “territorial food projects” (PAT, *Projets alimentaires territoriaux* in French) framed by a perspective of food “relocalisation” in France, devoted national policies framed by the notion of food and nutritional security in Brazil, and devoted municipal policies framed by

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the notions of food justice and food deserts — or more recently, food apartheid — in the USA.

This escalating institutionalisation of agri-food issues prompts questions about how they are collectively framed and debated democratically, extending beyond "closed" networks, as well as about the connection between such debates and the decision-making processes. Across the world, diverse arenas of debate are indeed emerging, under the forms of commissions, working groups or other multi-actor instances. Here, we will focus specifically on food councils at the local scale (local food councils), which, although diverse, can be characterised by the fact that they include a range of actors from diverse backgrounds (institutions, civil society, economic actors) whose objectives include influencing food policies and/or coordinating actors and/or actions.

There are indeed various "natures" of local food councils: the concept of food *policy* council (predominantly used in North America but increasingly in other places) does not carry the same meaning nor suggest the same goals as that of *local* food council or *local* food forum (as is more often said in France for example). We might anticipate that food *policy* councils (FPCs) would be initiated, supported, or coordinated by public institutions (such as municipalities or regional authorities) while *local* food councils or forums might emerge from multi-actors' networks initiated by other actors and remain autonomous from public institutions (and assert this autonomy). However, we will demonstrate that the reality is far more complex. There is thus a need to characterise the diversity of such local food councils (taken in an encompassing way), and not reduce it to the more well-known notion of food *policy* councils.

The first experiences and analysis of local food councils date back to the 1980s, primarily involving food policy councils, and are mainly anchored in Canada and the USA (Haughton et al., 1989; Dahlberg, 1994), where there is still an abundant literature (Welsh and MacRae, 1998; Schiff, 2008; Clayton et al., 2015; Bassarab et al., 2019; Mooney, 2022). In Latin America, it is in Brazil that the amplest literature about food councils can be found, linked to the specific public policies devoted to food and nutritional security and formalised by specific and compulsory councils at the three levels (municipal, state, federal), in charge of the management and assessment of national policy frameworks (especially for school food procurement) at these levels. While

both North American and Brazilian literatures mainly deal with food *policy* councils, we will see that the European literature appears more diverse. European-based studies have started to develop primarily in recent years, in line with the increasing interest for (regional/local/territorial) food governance and strategy in general (Blay-Palmer et al., 2021; Wilkes, 2022) (see Fig. 1).

While there have been some large surveys of food (policy) councils, mostly emanating from networks and organisations working in this field, such as the Hopkins Center or RUAF Global Partnership on Sustainable Urban Agriculture and Food Systems (Scherb et al., 2012; Halliday et al., 2019; Santo et al., 2021), so far, none of them have assessed the actual diversity of food councils worldwide. The only recent review paper deals specifically with food *policy* councils (to the expense of different and less institutional forms of food councils) and is based on anglophone and mainly North American literature (Schiff et al., 2022). The authors recognise the need to adopt a geographical approach to understand how food councils tackle different issues. However, defining the geographic entrees to do this is not an easy task. Based on our own literature review, we will propose to identify three major regions that seem relevant to this issue: North America, Brazil and Europe. Another blind spot that can be noticed, and that we will address in our review, is that very few papers include rural situations, except for rare examples.

The overall objective of this paper is thus to assess the current state of knowledge on local food councils and to characterise their diversity, taking into account the specificities of Brazilian and European literatures and experiences, beyond the more commented and studied North American ones.

As a review of mainly empirical studies, this article's aim is to analyse, on the one hand, the approaches and lenses adopted by different authors and, on the other hand, the "realities" corresponding to the cases under study in the articles and surveys compiled in our corpus. This article will characterise (i) the councils' functions, in relation to the diversity of origins and degrees of institutionalisation across different contexts, which will allow us to identify four types of local food councils; ii) the way they tackle participation and inclusion of different actors of the agri-food system, with a particular emphasis on communities and civil society and iii) their framing of the agri-food transitions. We will examine how these different aspects can be related to different national

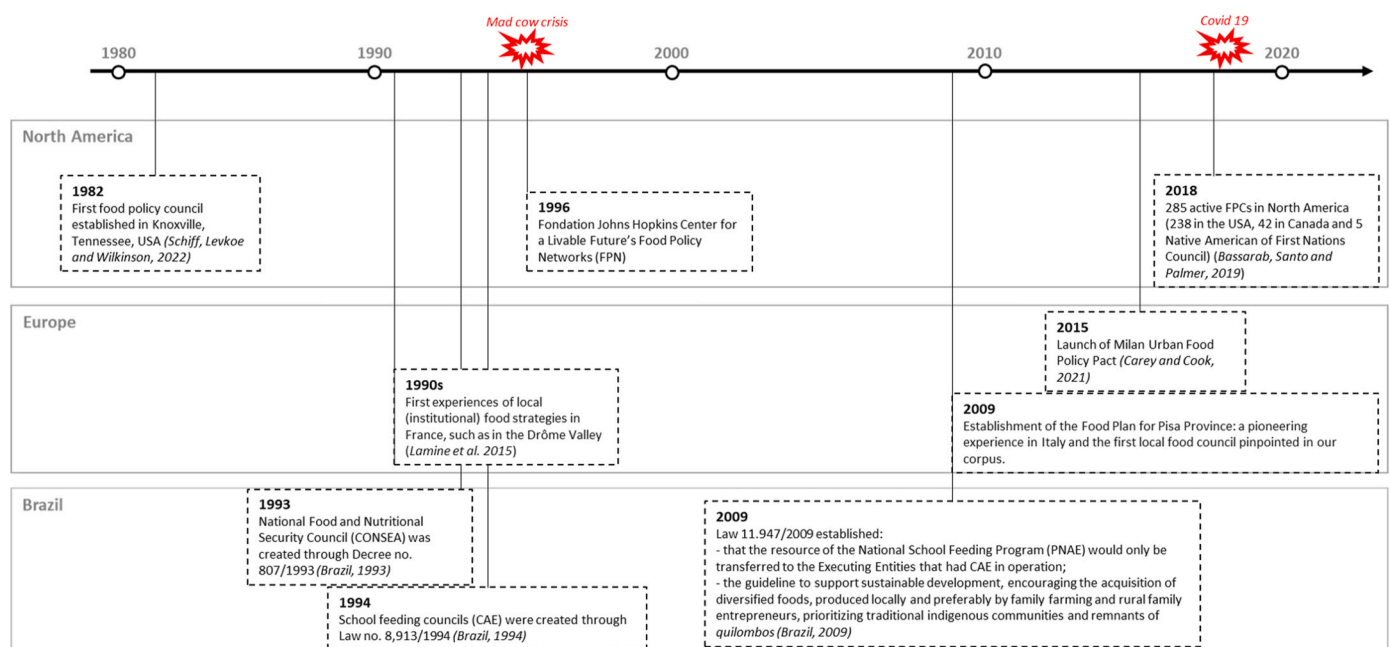


Fig. 1. Timeline showing some major milestones concerning local food councils in the three major regions (North America, Europe and Brazil) (Bassarab et al., 2019; Brazil, 1993; Carey and Cook, 2021; Lamine et al., 2015; Schiff et al., 2022; Brazil, 1994; Brazil, 2009).

and more local contexts.

These three analytical entrees will be applied to the three large regions that we have taken into account. North America has been included for the historical significance of both empirical cases and the extensive literature on the subject. Brazil has been included because its cases exhibit unique characteristics, as we will demonstrate later, and both authors possess a strong familiarity with the Brazilian context. Regarding Europe, we have chosen to focus on a few studies that illustrate a diversity of situations, although they do not represent extensively European diversity. Other European and Latin American countries, as well as those in Asia, Africa, and Oceania, are not considered in this review. Despite the literature being less abundant in these regions, we suggest that future studies should explore their specificities.

In addition to this introduction, the text comprises the following sections: the methods used for the literature review; a concise description of the selected corpus of literature; our findings on the functions of local food councils in relation to their origins and degrees of institutionalisation, on the issue of participation and inclusion and on the framing of agri-food transitions; and finally the discussion and conclusions.

## 2. Methodological strategy

The scoping review was carried out using an iterative approach, involving a flexible and recursive process to refine the research questions and analytical entrees, as well as the search strategy as the review progressed. The review was conducted as follows (Fig. 2).

### 2.1. Choice of a definition of local food councils

We found multiple definitions of (local) food (policy) councils or groups through our initial reading of both review/surveys and empirical papers on the subject.

According to Schiff (2008), most food policy councils share some key defining characteristics that distinguish them from other types of food systems organisations or networks, such as (i) the use of a cross-sectoral or “whole of food systems” approach, with a focus on integrating programs and/or policy across its membership and the various sectors of the food system; (ii) bringing together a wide range of representatives from a diversity of sectors; and (iii) being place-based.

According to Harper et al. (2009), a food policy council consists of representatives and stakeholders from many sectors of the food system (production, consumption, processing, distribution and waste recycling), often including anti-hunger and food justice advocates, educators, nonprofit organisations, concerned citizens, government officials, farmers, grocers, chefs, workers, food processors and food distributors. All these actors work with city and state governments to promote the social, economic, and environmental health of local and regional food systems.

Based on these definitions (and others), and recognising our decision not to restrict our study to food policy councils but instead encompass all sorts of local food councils (LFCs), regardless of whether they have a direct association with policy actors, we have chosen to suggest a more inclusive definition for the purposes of this article. Our broader definition aims to encompass the diverse range of these instances: *multi-actor groups whose objectives include influencing food policies and/or coordinating actors and actions under a coherent umbrella of goals by working across sectors, engaging with government policy and programs, grassroots/non-profit organisations and networks, local business and food workers.*

### 2.2. Developing an iterative protocol and conducting the initial search

Based on this definition, a review was conducted of both articles published in peer-reviewed scientific journals and grey literature. The searches were carried out in the Google Scholar database, rather than in databases containing only peer-reviewed scientific articles such as WOS

(Table 1). Documents published from 2009 to 2023,<sup>1</sup> in English, Spanish, Portuguese, French and Italian were included.

Other articles were occasionally included in the corpus through “snowball effect” (cited by selected articles, for example). The scanning of a few articles in each language allowed the refining of our search terms and keywords (see Table 1).

### 2.3. Definition of the analytical entrees

Engaging in initial readings of reviews and empirical articles, as well as participating in a writing workshop, played a crucial role in shaping the analytical entrees that guided our review. The first articles identified – comprising empirical cases, reviews, and surveys – primarily focused on descriptive aspects of local food councils’ functions, priority themes, and participation (mostly through the composition of these councils). Interestingly, we also observed that the specific trajectories of food councils and the contexts in which they emerged were rarely addressed in the literature, despite the fact that considering specific contexts and trajectories might allow understanding the aforementioned aspects (functions, main activities, composition, participation).

Thus, the first analytical entree we developed was about the sets of functions of local food councils, and our hypothesis was that it was linked to their origins and degrees of institutionalisation. Bassarab et al. (2019), Schiff et al. (2022) and Scherb et al. (2012) had already explored some aspects of this topic, focusing on food councils’ functions, principal activities and links to policy, primarily in the USA and Canada. Expanding the geographical scope to include Brazil and Europe confirmed our hypothesis of a more diverse range of situations than reported in the North American literature.

The second analytical entree emerged from the authors’ experiences with the topic and specially the recent experience of a local food council in their study area (southern Ardèche, France), through a participatory action-research initiative that had started in 2018. These experiences underscored the importance of addressing how participation and inclusion were managed within local food councils. Initial readings confirmed the need for further exploration, as most articles addressed participation (mostly through composition) highlighting the difficulty of including underrepresented voices in the process.

Our third analytical entree is the framing of agri-food transitions. Indeed, another notable feature shared by the articles in our corpus is the limited prominence of the notion of ecologisation.<sup>2</sup> More generally, the way agri-food system transitions are framed by these entities and their actors is not analysed in these articles.

The three analytical entrees presented in the article are thus as follows.

- (i) functions of local food councils in relation to their origins and degrees of institutionalisation,
- (ii) the treatment of composition, participation, and inclusion,
- (iii) the framing of agri-food transitions.

These three analytical entrees are studied through the lenses of both local and (supra)national contexts, highlighting the shared features and specificities of our three major regions.

<sup>1</sup> Initially, we planned to include documents from 2010 to 2023. However, upon discovering Harper et al. (2009) – the first ‘transversal’ report that we found, suggesting a shift in the academic treatment of the subject – we decided to extend our research period to encompass 2009 to 2023.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of “ecologisation”, actually most used in the French-speaking debates, refers to the increasing consideration of environmental issues in agricultural policies and practices.

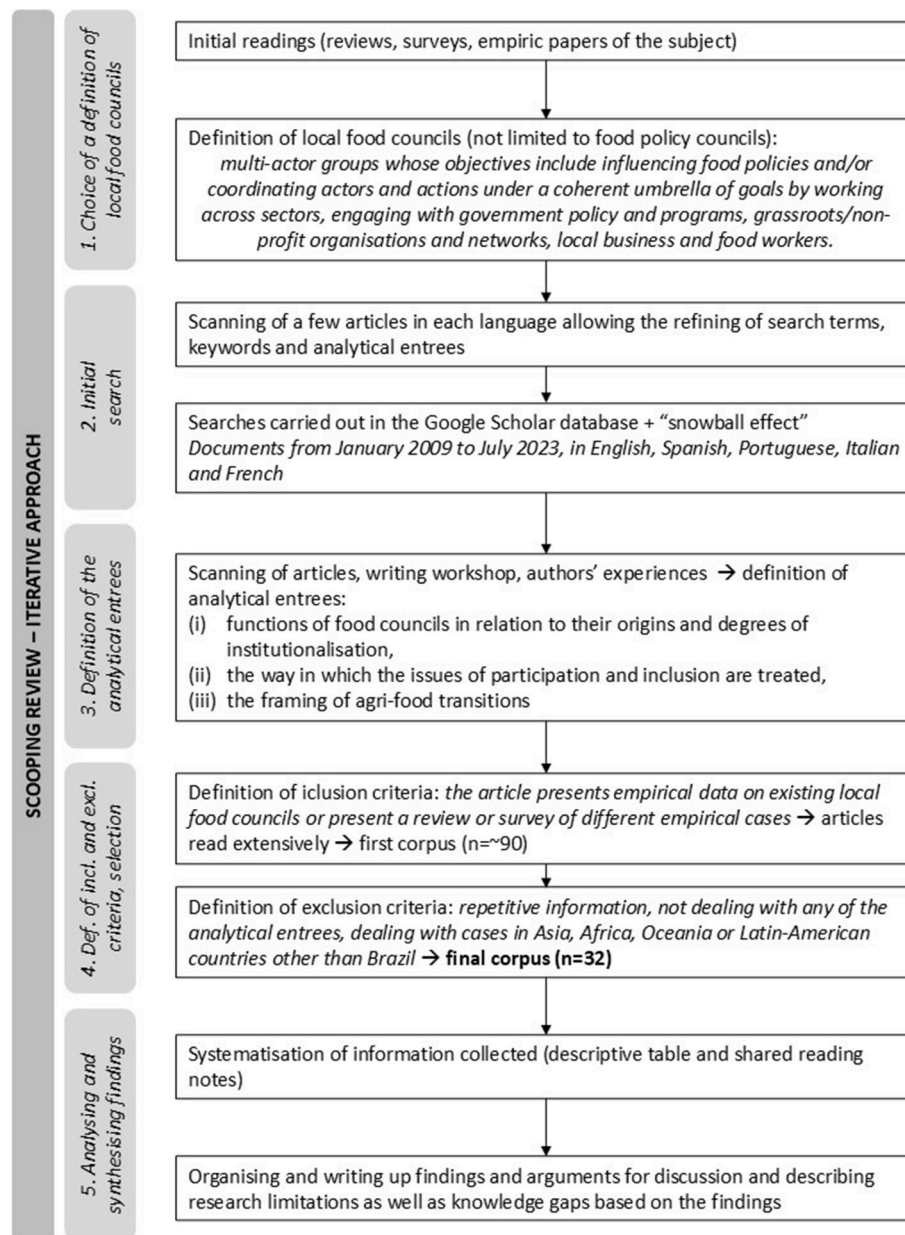


Fig. 2. Scheme illustrating the applied methodology.

#### 2.4. Definition of inclusion and exclusion criteria, screening and selection

The inclusion criteria were chosen so as to integrate a greater diversity: the article presents empirical data on existing councils or presents a review or survey of different empirical cases. Articles that met the inclusion criteria were then read extensively.

A total of about 90 articles constituted a first corpus that was then reduced through the following exclusion criteria: the article presents repetitive information (multiple articles dealing with the same empirical case), the article does not deal with any of the three analytical entrees, the article deals with empirical cases in Asia, Africa, Oceania or Latin-American countries other than Brazil.

After the completion of in-depth screening, 32 articles were selected, constituting the corpus on which we based our review.

#### 2.5. Analysing and synthesising findings

In order to systematise the information collected, we put in place a

descriptive table for all the articles of the corpus (Appendix 1) and a shared document of reading notes. We strived to categorise the various articles in the descriptive table based on several criteria: the geographical region, the empirical cases covered (if applicable), their form, comments and insights on contextual elements (rural x urban, population size, etc.), discipline, methodology employed, as well as the primary objective of the article, and finally, our three analytical entrees.

The last stage consisted of organising and writing up findings and arguments for discussion and describing research limitations as well as knowledge gaps based on the findings.

#### 2.6. Limits of our strategy

While the English term “food policy council” is very well established in the literature, this is not the case in other languages included in this review (Portuguese, Spanish, Italian and French). This tends to reinforce the effect of “over-representation” of articles in English, and therefore, often, of experiences in English-speaking countries (North America in

**Table 1**

Keywords (search terms) by language and number of documents found using Google Scholar and Web Of Science (from January 2009 up to July 2023).

Language	Keywords/search terms	Google Scholar results	WOS results
English	“Food policy council”	3790	31
	“Food council”	4190	113
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>11040</b>	<b>190</b>
Spanish	“Consejo alimentario”	127	0
	“Consejo alimentario municipal”	24	0
	“Consejo alimentario local”	5	0
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>0</b>
Portuguese	“Conselho municipal”	16200	0
	alimentação		
	“Conselho estadual”	14400	1
	alimentação		
	Conselho alimentação	32800	85
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>63400</b>	<b>86</b>
Italian	“Consiglio del cibo”	28	0
	“Consigli del cibo”	19	0
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>0</b>
French	Conseil alimentation	21600	266
	“Conseil local” alimentation	331	0
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>21931</b>	<b>266</b>

particular). In an attempt to counteract this over-representation, the keywords “Food council Europe” and “Food council Brazil” have been added to the list of English search terms.

Due to the wide variety of food council structures, objectives and activities and the great diversity of contexts and local settings around the world, it is difficult to obtain a representative sample of local food councils. Thus, our objective for the selection of articles was to achieve a sufficient diversity in our corpus to account for the great diversity of both LFCs and analytical lenses applied to them. This is the reason behind our decision to include fewer articles dealing with North American cases in proportion to their existing corpus, in order to over-represent European and Brazilian cases.

### 3. Characterisation of our corpus of literature: reviews, surveys and empirical cases

The final corpus consists of 32 articles, comprising 25 focused on either monographic or multiple empirical cases, along with three surveys (Scherb et al., 2012; Calancie et al., 2018; Range et al., 2023), one survey accompanied by case studies (Bassarab et al., 2019), one scoping review (Schiff et al., 2022), one blending literature review and survey (Harper et al., 2009) and one theoretical article based on a survey (Mooney, 2022).

All 7 reviews and surveys are North American, which justifies our own choice to include other regions where there is also a rich literature on food councils, Brazil and Europe. Only one article adopts an inter-continental geographic scope, analysing both North American and European cases (Table 2).

The articles of the corpus deal predominantly with urban cases and formal food councils. This raises an important question: is the scarcity of rural case studies and of less formal ones due to their rarity, or is it a reflection of a lack of research interest? Although our aim here is not to answer this question – which would require an extensive, international survey of LFCs – this observation led us to voluntarily look for empirical articles dealing with rural cases (3 in total), mid/small-sized cities (4 articles) and less formalised cases (only one) so as to include them in our corpus.

The only proper literature review we have identified about local food councils is that of Schiff et al. (2022) who identified four central themes within the realm of research devoted to food policy councils (FPCs): (i)

**Table 2**

Characteristics of the corpus.

Great regions	Number of articles (32 in total)	Disciplines (order of frequency)	Reviews and surveys	Empirical articles
North America	15 (7 reviews or surveys, 7 monographic case studies and 1 study of 10 cases)	Political science, geography (urban planning), medicine (public health)	Harper et al. (2009); Scherb et al. (2012); Calancie et al. (2018); Bassarab et al. (2019); Mooney (2022); Schiff et al., 2022; Range et al. (2023)	Sands et al. (2016); Calancie et al. (2017); Horst (2017); Gupta et al. (2018); Halliday et al., 2019; Vatterott (2019); Thompson et al. (2020); Levkoe et al. (2021)
Brazil	6 (5 monographic case studies, 1 study on 9 cases)	Sociology, management sciences and medicine (public health)	-	Gallina et al. (2012); Gabriel et al. (2013); Machado et al. (2015); Triches and Schneider (2015); Tângari (2019); Ribeiro and Bógus (2021)
Europe	10 (6 monographic cases, 4 multi-case studies)	Geography, economics, sociology, management sciences and political sciences	-	Forno and Maurano (2016); Calori et al. (2019); García-García and Moragues-Faus (2019); Mazzocchi and Marino (2019); Sieveking (2019); van der Valk (2019); Corade et al. (2021); Lapoutte (2021); Arcuri et al., 2022; Michel et al. (2022)
International	1 (Belgium and United States)	Sociology	-	Prové et al., 2019

activities undertaken by food policy councils, (ii) organisational dimensions, (iii) challenges faced, and (iv) facilitators that promote their success. These authors found that FPCs have experienced a significant increase in number and vary widely in their structures, activities and functions.

All reviews and surveys are based on large samples of food councils (from 19 to 222) based in the USA and/or Canada. Harper et al. (2009) – the first transversal study found in our review – focused on lessons gleaned from the practical experiences of FPC. Some of the lessons learned through this study are that, for example, while success stories are as diverse as the communities that create them, the challenges faced by these councils have been much the same over a broad geographic and time scale. Challenges with funding and staff time, over-commitment, and dependence on a strong personality or political figure have been recurring themes continent-wide. Scherb et al. (2012) conducted an

electronic survey of FPC leaders to describe FPCs, their level of engagement in policy processes, and the scope of their policy activities. Out of the 56 FPCs that responded to the survey, 88% were actively involved in policy initiatives across various platforms, with 79% addressing multiple subjects. 95% of FPCs indicated their participation in policy-making through problem identification and 78% through educational efforts. Among those not actively involved in policy work, the most commonly cited reasons were insufficient resources and a lack of technical expertise. Bassarab et al. (2019) draw on an annual (2018) large survey of 222 North American food policy councils conducted by the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future. Their work aimed to examine the relationship between FPC's structural factors (organisational structure, relationship to government and membership) and their policy orientation.

While the studies above adopt a descriptive and analytical stance, Range et al. (2023) employed an evaluative framework in their survey of 19 food policy councils in the United States. They measured these councils' effectiveness and assigned scores across three key themes: (i) leadership and governance, (ii) engagement with key stakeholders, and (iii) activities promoting food justice. Also in an evaluative perspective, Calancie et al. (2018) proposed an impact assessment of FPCs. Their study identified potential "impact domains" by scrutinising 300 initiatives launched by 66 food policy councils, shedding light on the multifaceted influence of these councils, as these impact domains include supporting resilient food systems, increasing access to healthy foods, fostering economic development, promoting equity within food systems, ensuring environmental sustainability, and enhancing knowledge of and demand for healthy foods.

Finally, Mooney (2022), based on the same survey as Bassarab et al. (2019), delved into the theoretical underpinnings of the broader phenomenon of food councils. This article's theorisation suggests that food policy councils can be viewed as "internal governance units" that play a crucial role in implementing the "upcoming food regime" at the local level, as they are building significant local organisational bases or "local movement centres", which can serve as essential structures for mobilisation.

Our corpus of 25 empirical articles is made up of 44% of articles presenting European cases, 32% North American cases and 24% Brazilian cases. North American articles include, beyond the above reviews and surveys, 7 monographic case studies and 1 comprehensive study of 10 cases. Among these articles, 5 tackled American cases and 3 Canadian ones, the majority of which being food policy councils, except for the St. Louis Food Policy Coalition (Vatterott, 2019) and the Thunder Bay and Area Food Strategy (Levkoe et al., 2021). This North American literature mainly tackles the issues of participation and food justice and how these instances influence food system change.

Brazilian articles include 5 monographic case studies and one study involving 9 cases. The majority of the Brazilian articles within our corpus specifically tackled cases of school feeding councils (CAE, *Conselho de Alimentação Escolar* in Portuguese), which are mandatory and directly tied to the National School Feeding Program. The main transversal theme tackled is the criticism of a "biased representativity" and a "fragile democracy" due to imbalances in knowledge and power. Two other types of councils are also studied: the CONSEA Rio (Council of Food and Nutritional Security of the City of Rio de Janeiro) (Tângari, 2019), and the Food and Nutritional Security Interest Group of the city of São Paulo, a less formal and institutional form of council (Ribeiro and Bógus, 2021).

The 10 European studies consist of 6 monographic cases and 4 multi-case studies. The European literature within our corpus stands out for its exploration of "non-conventional food councils" that go beyond the traditional boundaries of food policy councils. These innovative models often originate from civil society networks or action-research projects, as evidenced by Forno and Maurano (2016) and van der Valk (2019). A noteworthy feature of this European literature is the predominant use of a monographic approach, which entails in-depth investigations of

specific food councils in countries such as Spain, Germany, and France, as showcased by García-García and Moragues-Faus (2019), Sieveking (2019) and Lapoutte (2021). Furthermore, select studies within this European literature take a comparative stance, either by examining intra-European dynamics (Michel et al., 2022) or by contrasting the European context with North American counterparts, as exemplified in the research conducted by Prové et al. (2019).

These different focuses are partially linked to the specific disciplines that have particular influence in each of the three regions. Geography, economics, sociology, management sciences, urban planning, political sciences, public health and medical sciences are the most represented disciplines across regions, while urban planning is more represented in the North American literature, public health in the Brazilian one, and sociology in the European one.

#### 4. The influence of specific origins and degrees of institutionalisation on the functions of local food councils

The reviews and surveys, all based on North American cases, predominantly focus on the main activities, functions, and links to local governments of local food councils. Bassarab et al. (2019) explore their degree of institutionalisation, categorising the 222 cases of their study based on the structures in which food policy councils are housed or embedded and the nature of their relationship with the government or government members. The majority of cases are housed within nonprofit organisations (n = 78), 64 are directly "embedded in government", and 55 have no connection to government. Among those that are embedded in or in relation to the local government, the degrees of proximity vary significantly. Some count government officials and elected representatives among their members and many receive government support (whether financial support, administrative assistance, access to meeting spaces, etc.). Of course, this degree and form of institutionalisation frame their functions, i.e., most often, supporting and informing policy development (Bassarab et al., 2019; Schiff et al., 2022).

Most reviews or surveys have elaborated characterisations of LFCs' functions and thematic priorities, although some only deal with one or the other of these two topics (see Table 3). For the purposes of this article, thematic priorities represent the issues addressed in the primary activities and discussions within the LFCs, such as promoting healthy food access, managing food production, and optimizing food procurement. Functions denote the operational approaches these councils utilise to address their thematic priorities, such as policy advisory, advocacy for political change (lobbying) and sharing of resources, ideas and information.

Our diverse sample of cases, with an interesting geographical diversity, has enabled us to draw a new classification of the LFCs' functions<sup>3</sup> (Table 3). Within two great categories (namely "policy specific activities" and "larger activities") similar to those established by Schiff et al. (2022), we re-classified the list of LFCs' functions. An example of our re-classification involves the separation of functions previously grouped together by other authors, aimed at achieving greater explicitness. For instance, the function "to evaluate and influence policy" (Harper et al., 2009) is declined into three distinct categories in our classification: "policy advisory (provide expertise/technical assistance and training)", "control, monitoring, and evaluation of policy and public action" (as in Brazilian cases) and "advocacy for political change (lobbying)" (see arrows illustrating this particular reclassification in

<sup>3</sup> Thematic priorities will be further explored and analysed in part 6 of this article, where we use them to identify different framings for addressing agri-food transitions.

**Table 3**  
Categories of thematic priorities and functions identified in reviews and surveys<sup>a</sup>.

Article	Thematic priorities	Functions	Our classification of functions
Harper <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Address public health through improving food access, addressing hunger and food insecurity, and improving the quality of available food, Boost local economies and combat poverty	To serve as forums, To foster coordination between food system sectors, To evaluate and influence policy, To launch or support programs and services that address local needs.	<p><b>a. Policy specific activities:</b> a1. Policy advisory (provide expertise/technical assistance and training); a2. Implementation of policy and public action; a3. Control, monitoring, and evaluation of policy and public action; a4. Advocacy for political change (lobbying).</p> <p><b>b. Larger activities:</b> b1. Sharing of resources, ideas, and information; b2. Development /implementation/launch of programs/initiatives; b3. Support/funding/facilitation of program/initiative launches; b4. Generation of spaces for deliberation among food stakeholders and networking; b5. Collection and dissemination of information, promoting public awareness and education; b6. Exchanges and dialogues (community engagement).</p>
Scherb <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Increase access to local and/or healthy foods, Promote agriculture, Encourage state and municipal food planning efforts	Identify problems that could be addressed through policy, Educate public about food policy issues, Develop policy proposals, Lobby for specific proposals, Participate in the regulatory process, Endorse other organisations' of institutions' policies, Implement policies, Other (including general food system advocacy, formation of coalitions, and provision of expert testimony to decision makers)	
Calancie <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Supporting resilient food systems, Increasing access to healthy foods, Supporting economic development, Promoting equity in the food systems, Promoting environmental sustainability, Increasing knowledge of or demand for healthy foods.	Topic not covered	
Bassarab <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Healthy food access, Economic development, Anti-hunger, Food production, Food procurement, Land use planning, Food waste/recovery, Local food processing, transportation, Natural resources and environment, Food labour	Topic not covered	



<p>Schiff, Levkoe and Wilkinson (2022)</p>	<p>Topic not covered</p>	<p>Policy specific activities (impacting and influencing food related policy (directly or indirectly) at a municipal, regional, or state level): drafting resolutions, reports and proposals for and with governments; advocating for food-related issues; creating legislation to create an FPC within government; focus on policy change to support urban agriculture, Other activities: project development and implementation; implementing food (nutrition; urban food production; other (farm and fisheries) production; distribution) programs; creating and facilitating a network for food systems organisations: facilitating program implementation for food systems organisations; education on sustainable food systems; work on educating and raising awareness among policymakers about interconnected food system issues.</p>	
<p>Mooney (2022)</p>	<p>Same as Bassarab <i>et al.</i> (2019)</p>	<p>Community engagement, Advocacy, Capacity building, Policy planning, Education, Networking</p>	

<sup>a</sup> This table comprises 6 out of 7 reviews and surveys. The only exclusion is [Range et al. \(2023\)](#), as their survey does not address either the thematic priorities or the functions of food councils.

**Table 3).** This distinction emerged from our understanding that these functions represent fundamentally different roles.<sup>4</sup>

The set of functions seems to be strongly influenced by the origin of each local food council, as well as their degree of institutionalisation. We thus suggest a dynamic analysis of local food councils’ trajectories. However, articles dealing with these trajectories mostly describe contextual elements and the history of their establishment (their origin), without addressing the trajectories once the local food councils have been created. This is the case of [Sands et al. \(2016\)](#), who state that food (policy) councils can originate as community coalitions, be initiated by the executive branch of the government, through an executive order or be established through legislation, when a law or a statute passed by the legislative body formally creates and defines it.

For the purpose of this article, we considered origin and degree of institutionalisation were two analytical categories that could allow understanding how functions are articulated in different sets of functions.

<sup>4</sup> Other changes, additions and reformulations were identified in this article. We illustrate it with the example of “evaluate and influence policy” because explaining each of the proposals would be too long, and not the main objective of the article.

The functions, as explained earlier in this section, refer to the modes of action of these councils (in order to tackle their thematic priorities). The origin refers to how the council was established and which actor or institution initiated it (government, coalition, networks of local initiatives led by organized civil society, or action-research or research actors). The degree of institutionalisation refers to the process by which these councils are connected to or integral parts of government structures. Institutionalisation encompasses various elements, such as legal recognition, budget and resources, organisational structure, and partnerships and collaborations with the government.

Our categorisation by geographical zone has enabled us to identify four types of local food councils that articulate these analytical categories: their origin, their degree of institutionalisation and their sets of functions. These types appear to be more or less directly related to their geographical anchorage ([Table 4](#)).

The first type encompasses local food councils established through government decree or legislative action, and is characterised by a robust/strong level of institutionalisation. They primarily focus on advising, controlling, monitoring, and evaluating policy and public action. This type is predominantly found in Brazil. For instance, the CONSEA Rio ([Tângari, 2019](#)) was established by the municipal

**Table 4**

Types (T) of local food councils based on origins, forms and degree of institutionalisation and functions.

T	Origin	Form and degree of institutionalisation	Sets of functions	Examples <sup>a</sup>
1	Established by government (through decree or law), related to policy	Robust/strong institutionalisation: council directly dependent on the government	a1. Policy advisory (provide expertise/technical assistance and training), a3. Control, monitoring and evaluation of policy and public action. Mostly "policy specific activities" (a).	Adams County FPC (United States) (Calancie et al., 2017), school feeding council (CAE) Santa Catarina (Brazil) (Gabriel et al., 2013), CAE Chapeco (Brazil) (Gallina et al., 2012), 7 CAEs in the South (Brazil) (Machado et al., 2015), CONSEA Rio (Tangari, 2019), CAE Dois Irmãos (Brazil) (Triches and Schneider, 2015).
2	Related to the development, implementation or evaluation of a planning strategy (e.g., food plans)		a1. Policy advisory (provide expertise/technical assistance and training), a2. Implementation of policy and public action, a3. Control, monitoring and evaluation of policy and public action, b4. Generation of spaces of deliberation among food stakeholders and networking. Mostly "policy specific activities" (a).	Ghent (Belgium) et Philadelphia (United States) (Prové et al., 2019), Puget Sound Regional Food Policy Council (Canada) (Horst, 2017), Bordeaux (France) (Corade et al., 2021), Lyon (France) (Lapoutte, 2021), Valencia (Spain) (García-García and Moragues-Faus, 2019), Castel del Giudice (Italy) (Mazzocchi and Marino, 2019), FPC Strasbourg and FPC Mulhouse (Michel et al., 2022).
3	Coalition, networks of local initiatives led by organized civil society	Low/weak institutionalisation: council independent from the government	a4. Advocacy for political change (lobbying), b1. Sharing of resources, ideas, and information; b2. Development/implementation/launch of programs/initiatives; b3. Support/funding/facilitation of program/initiative launches; b4. Generation of spaces for deliberation among food stakeholders and networking; b5. Collection and dissemination of information, promoting public awareness and education; b6. Exchanges and dialogues (community engagement). Mostly "larger activities" (b).	Thunder Bay and Area Food Strategy (Canada) (Levkoe et al., 2021), Holyoke Food and Fitness Policy Council (United States) (Sands et al., 2016), Oldenburg FPC (Sieveking, 2019), MRA Amsterdam (Netherlands) (van der Valk, 2019), St. Louis Food Policy Coalition (United States) (Vatterott, 2019), Food and Nutritional Security Interest Group of São Paulo (Brazil) (Ribeiro and Bógus, 2021), FPC Freiburg and FPC Basel (Michel et al., 2022), Piana del Cibo (Italy) (Arcuri et al., 2022), Oktibbeha County (United States) (Thompson et al., 2020), Bergamo (Italy) (Calori et al., 2019), Pisa (Italy) (Forno and Maurano, 2016).
4	Research actors (research projects or research-action)			

<sup>a</sup> Only two empirical articles, Gupta et al. (2018) and Halliday (2019), are omitted from this table, as no detailed information regarding the origin and trajectory of each case is provided, making classification challenging.

government of Rio de Janeiro in 2003 through a decree and is integrated into the Office of Social Assistance, showcasing a high degree of institutionalisation. Its primary overall aim is to provide guidance to the municipality on matters related to the development of food and nutritional security policies (policy advisory). Unlike their counterparts in North America, Brazilian food councils indeed represent an extension of a national policy and function as regulatory bodies.

Gabriel et al. (2013) and Machado et al. (2015) describe the redemocratisation process in Brazil following the period of military dictatorship (1964–1985), which led to the emergence of such food councils. In this post-dictatorship context, decentralisation became a pivotal change in the development and management of Brazilian politics. After the enactment of the new federal constitution in 1988, the 1990s witnessed the prolific creation of thematic/sectoral municipal and state councils, with food and agriculture councils among them. Food councils in Brazil were institutionalised from the outset through decrees and laws, closely tied to public policy requirements. They played a critical role in civil society's control and evaluation of public policies (Gallina et al., 2012; Machado et al., 2015; Triches and Schneider, 2015; Tangari, 2019). As mentioned before, the school feeding councils, present at both state and municipal levels, serve as a co-management space between the state and society, enabling supervision, deliberation, and consultation to ensure the proper functioning of the National School Feeding Program (Gabriel et al., 2013).

In addition to this importance of larger processes of redemocratisation and decentralisation, some authors examine the creation of food councils through the lens of the trajectory of the food and nutritional security concept in Brazil (Gallina et al., 2012; Ribeiro and Bógus,

2021). Under the influence of renowned nutritionist and geographer Josué de Castro who demonstrated that "collective hunger" was not confined to isolated regions but rather "a much more general and widespread social phenomenon" (De Castro, 1952) and with the strong involvement and alliances of social movements, food and nutritional security has held a prominent position on the Brazilian political agenda. This was particularly evident with the establishment of the National Council for Food and Nutritional Security (CONSEA)<sup>5</sup> in 2003, coinciding with the launch of the Fome Zero (Zero Hunger) Program, under Lula's (Workers' Party) first term. Councils for Food and Nutritional Security were also established at municipal and state levels.

The second type involves councils emerging out of the development, implementation, or evaluation of planning strategies. These councils also exhibit a strong degree of institutionalisation and focus on advising, controlling, monitoring, and evaluating policy and public action (like the above ones) but also implementing them. They additionally serve as spaces for deliberation among various actors. This type is prevalent in North America, and it is increasingly observed in Europe as the emphasis on food planning becomes more common. An example is the Puget Sound Regional Food Policy Council in Canada (Horst, 2017), which serves as an advisory body for metropolitan food planning, established by the government in 2010. A similar scenario can be seen with the Castel del Giudice council in Italy, which was created as part of a

<sup>5</sup> The National Council for Food and Nutritional Security (CONSEA) was dismantled in January 2019, under the presidential term of Jair Bolsonaro, and recreated in January 2023, under Lula's third presidential term.

strategic food plan (Mazzocchi and Marino, 2019).

Our analysis of North American empirical articles shows that food councils, most often referred to as food policy councils, typically originate from local (municipal or regional) public services, frequently within the healthcare sector. The analysis of pioneer cases, such as the Toronto Food Policy Council, sheds light on the reasons why these healthcare-related services opt to create food policy councils. This FPC was founded in 1990, emerging as a Subcommittee of the Board of Health to address growing food insecurity and food bank use in Toronto, phenomena that accompanied globalisation and the decline of industrial employment opportunities (Halliday, 2019; Toronto Food Policy Council, 2019). Despite this frequent anchorage in health-related services, North American FPCs seem to seek to establish linkages with other services, focusing on promoting intersectoral collaboration.

In Europe, the proliferation of municipal or territorial food strategies and an increasing focus on food planning has led to the creation of numerous institutionalised local food councils. They are initiated by public authorities and tasked with formulating, implementing, monitoring, or evaluating "strategic food plans" (García-García and Moragues-Faus, 2019; Mazzocchi and Marino, 2019). Nevertheless, European local food councils exhibit substantial diversity, with some emerging from civil society coalitions and action-research groups (Forno and Maurano, 2016; Mazzocchi and Marino, 2019). This diversity, of course, influences their approach to policy-making, as some of them seek to exert influence "from the outside," through *manifestos* — *declarations outlining their goals, principles, and recommendations for local food systems* — for example (Lapoutte, 2021).

In contrast, the third and fourth types are characterised by a lower level of institutionalisation, as these councils remain independent from governments and primarily focus on advocating for policy change (lobbying), resource sharing, and experimentation. The key differentiator between these types is their origin: the third type emerges from a coalition/network of local/grassroots initiatives, while the fourth emanates from research or action-research groups. Both types can be found in North America and Europe. The third type is exemplified by the Thunder Bay and Area Food Strategy (TBAFS) in Canada (Levkoe et al., 2021). TBAFS is an informal network of diverse organisations established in 2007 after years of collaboration and community-led efforts, managed by a non-profit community organisation. Its main objectives include collecting, integrating, and disseminating information, supporting regional food system initiatives, and advocating for policy change. A good example of the fourth type is the Oktibbeha County FPC, located in a rural setting in the United States. It was established by a group of scholars and community members, representing an independent local food council with a focus on promoting community development and meaningful projects (Thompson et al., 2020).<sup>6</sup>

In summary, these four types clarify that functions related to advising (a1), implementing policies (a2), controlling, monitoring, evaluating policy and public action (a3) and generating spaces of deliberation among food stakeholders (b4) are more prominent in councils created by local authorities with a strong institutionalisation (types 1 and 2). On the other hand, councils originating from civil society organisations and research or action-research groups/projects (types 3 and 4), characterised by weak institutionalisation, tend to emphasise functions related to experimentation/initiatives' launches (b2, b3), resource sharing (b1, b5), networking (b4 and b6), and lobbying (a4).

<sup>6</sup> As part of an action-research project initiated in 2018, both authors are working with local actors in the experimentation of a local food council in South Ardèche, France: the *Conseil Local de l'Alimentation L'Assiette et le Territoire* (see <https://www.assiette-territoire.com/> and <https://journals.openedition.org/geocarrefour/20864>).

## 5. Composition, participation and inclusion

While the composition of local food councils is tackled by almost all articles, the treatment of participation in the literature and the understanding of the notion of participation itself, as well as the way it is prioritized by LFCs, exhibit a significant diversity, in line with diverse national and local contexts, legal frameworks, and societal factors.

All reviews and surveys tackle the composition of local food councils. Harper et al. (2009) observe that they typically include members and initiatives that encompass various sectors of the food system, such as consumption, distribution, and food production. However, it is worth noting that sectors such as waste management and food processing, both in terms of membership representation and thematic priorities, receive comparatively less attention. Expanding on the composition of local food councils, Schiff et al. (2022) stress that while they aim to include members from various sectors to ensure comprehensive representation across the food system, encompassing the public, private, and charitable sectors, it is crucial to recognise a prevailing lack of social diversity. These councils are predominantly made up of white, middle-class professionals with similar socio-economic and educational backgrounds. This challenge of including underrepresented voices in decision-making processes aligns with the observations of Bassarab et al. (2019), who view food (policy) councils as crucial platforms for engaging citizens in the realm of food democracy. In this sense, Mooney (2022) suggests that food policy councils experiments are creating "hybrid institutions" that involve collaboration between government, private enterprise, civil society and scientific-technical communities.

In North America, the issue of participation holds significant importance in most empirical articles, as it is seen as a means to rectify historical power imbalances and promote equitable participation. Building coalitions necessitates a deliberate and considerate approach to redistribute power and address issues of leadership, racial equity, and economic inclusivity (Gupta et al., 2018). Nonetheless, it is observed, as mentioned above, that the social groups most directly affected by food system issues are often underrepresented in LFCs. In this context, the notion of "meaningful participation," as proposed by McCullagh and Santo (2014), has gained prominence in North American discussions. This concept goes beyond mere participation and emphasises creating a supportive environment where all participants feel comfortable and valued, with their opinions respected and taken into account. Some councils have taken concrete steps to facilitate meaningful participation, such as the Toronto Youth Food Policy Council, which actively seeks to engage historically excluded groups in food discussions, including indigenous peoples, racialised communities, immigrants, and low-income individuals (Halliday, 2019). Additionally, efforts have been made by some LFCs to create an accessible environment by providing culturally appropriate meals at meetings, offering childcare services, and scheduling meetings at times convenient for parents (Sands et al., 2016; Halliday, 2019).

In Brazil, the concept of participation is defined by a well-established legal framework, which prescribes specific rules for the composition of school feeding councils (CAE) and councils for food and nutritional security (CONSEA). This framework aims to ensure a balance between state representatives and civil society members. However, numerous studies on CAEs have revealed the limitations of this "highly institutionalised" participation model. Many authors have highlighted the challenges of achieving genuine civil society participation, citing significant imbalances in power and knowledge as barriers to meaningful democratic engagement. It is not uncommon for civil society representatives within these councils to have close affiliations with the government, which raises concerns of biased representation (Gallina et al., 2012; Gabriel et al., 2013; Machado et al., 2015). In essence, the legal framework in Brazil, while promoting participation, has faced challenges in achieving true democratic engagement, and some voices remain underrepresented in decision-making processes. Furthermore, concerns about the "elitisation of participation" have been documented

in deliberative spaces in Brazil (Morita et al., 2006), as well as the exclusion of marginalised communities from the food policy debate.

In Europe, two main types of participation models are identified: one based on ensuring the representation of predefined stakeholder types, such as actors from various institutions or sectors within the food system, and one that blends these stakeholders with civil society participation, often organised as coalitions of grassroots initiatives (Forno and Maurano, 2016; Mazzocchi and Marino, 2019; Corade et al., 2021). Different authors use diverse terms to address this issue critically, with some focusing on promoting meaningful participation, fair inclusion, and enhanced social cohesion, and others emphasise the goal of achieving balanced representation (Corade et al., 2021; Michel et al., 2022). The four LFCs studied by Michel et al. (2022) share this goal of achieving a balanced representation of all relevant stakeholders within the food system. However, there are notable issues of under- and over-representation within their governing bodies. While these local food councils strive to involve sustainability-oriented food small and medium enterprises (SMEs), they often lack representation from large or conventional farms and food businesses, which, according to the authors, is due to their focus on ambitious environmental and social goals. For example, the food council of Strasbourg<sup>7</sup> excludes large conventional farms to prevent a dominant actor group from taking the lead, but includes voices from both organic and conventional agriculture. This phenomenon can lead to adverse consequences by perpetuating unchallenged power dynamics. Furthermore, while local food councils incorporate civil society organisations and municipalities to pursue social goals, representatives of non-profit organisations supporting vulnerable populations, such as low-income or immigrant communities, are notably absent. Despite citizens and food professionals having opportunities to voice their opinions, they are not directly involved in decision-making (Michel et al., 2022).

Another intriguing example in Europe is the Intermunicipal Food Policy (IFP) of the Plain of Lucca, Italy, which features a complex governance structure. This structure includes an *Agorà* (open assembly for participation and consultation), a food policy council that combines participatory and decision-making functions, and an Assembly of Mayors, the political decision-making body. The food policy council serves as a bridge between the *Agorà* discussions and the Assembly of Mayors, influencing policy development based on grassroots perspectives. While it provides advisory recommendations, mayors are not compelled to adopt them. However, a higher level of participation from citizens and food system stakeholders in the open consultation process increases the likelihood that the advice provided by the food policy council will be considered, especially when dealing with contentious food-related issues (Arcuri et al., 2022).

The issue of participation varies across regions, with Brazil primarily concerned about balanced representation, North America emphasising equitable inclusion, and Europe adopting diverse participation models. While each region faces unique challenges, the quest for a more inclusive and participatory approach in food governance remains a permanent challenge.

## 6. The framing of the agri-food transitions

Agri-food transitions are subject to diverse framings within the realm of local food councils and related literature. These framings influence the direction of the transition and the capacity of communities to self-organise and shape agroecological transformations (Anderson et al., 2019). However, most articles within our corpus do not directly address the framings of transitions in agri-food systems. If the term

<sup>7</sup> It is important to highlight that the authors consider the governance structure of an institutional Territorial Food Project (PAT) as a food council in the case of Strasbourg, despite the fact this is not called food council by its members and by the institution.

"sustainability" is often mentioned, it is as a static, fixed descriptor, included as part of a list of adjectives when discussing work/policy priorities, such as in expressions like "local, sustainable, and healthy food" (Harper et al., 2009; Mazzocchi and Marino, 2019; Arcuri et al., 2022), "sustainable agriculture" or "sustainable farming" (Harper et al., 2009; Calancie et al., 2018). These local food councils seem to use the term "sustainability" in a somewhat superficial and descriptive manner, without delving into the intricacies of the complex process of transitioning the agri-food systems toward more sustainable practices.

This is partly due to the fact that the literature focuses rather on the functions and priorities of these local food councils as well as on participation issues, as we have seen. However, these different aspects are interrelated, and Bassarab et al. (2019) revealed that the framing and strategies employed by LFCs are notably shaped by the composition of their membership. Local food councils led by non-profit organisations tend to prioritise food production, whereas those led by or comprising government members allocate relatively less attention to production and land use planning, thus adopting contrasted framing of agri-food systems' transitions.

While they are not the primary focus of the analyses of local food councils, most articles indirectly provide insights into the framings of agri-food transitions that are at stake. We have defined two analytical axes to characterise these framings. The first one contrasts a food-centric framing with a systemic perspective, and the second one, a food accessibility with a food democracy perspective.

On the first axis, the food-centric perspective focuses on consumption and healthy food and prioritises nutritional quality and individual food choices, with a focus on enhancing public health through promoting healthier eating habits. It centres on the well-being of consumers and the quality of the food they can access. The systemic perspective places strong emphasis on the relationship between agriculture and food, aiming to support environmentally friendly and/or marginalised farmers while also addressing food-related issues.

On the second axis, the food accessibility perspective focuses on ensuring equitable access to food resources, particularly for marginalised communities. The food democracy perspective focuses on strengthening the capacity of individuals and communities to make informed choices and actively participate in food-related decision-making processes. Including but going beyond accessibility concerns, it places importance on the active engagement of stakeholders and civil society in shaping the agri-food system, while challenging historical power imbalances.

These two axes define 4 types of framing and 4 quadrants where we can position our cases: a food-centric – accessibility framing, a systemic – accessibility framing, a food-centric – food democracy framing and a systemic – food democracy framing (Fig. 3).

The food-centric – accessibility framing emphasises actions and arguments related to consumption, healthy food, and issues related to food access, with less attention given to aspects of agri-food integration and ecological considerations. This perspective is prevalent in the majority of Brazilian cases, and some North American cases. In their study on the CAE of Chapeco, located in the southern region of Brazil (1994) observed that the council's discussions predominantly focused on topics such as hygiene, nutritional quality, acceptability, and the regularity of food supply. These discussions centred around the access to food within the framework of the National School Feeding Program. However, categories such as access to food as a broader right (which became a constitutional right in Brazil in 2010) and sustainability across multiple dimensions, including environmental, cultural, economic, and social aspects, were absent in the discussions. Similarly, Machado et al. (2015) studied both the state-level CAE and eight municipal CAEs, finding that they shared similar priorities in terms of the subjects they addressed. CAEs primarily serve as a direct instrument of social control over public school food policy in Brazil, focusing on ensuring equal access to healthy and nutritious food for school children and limiting their focus to the practical control, monitoring and evaluation of public action at the state

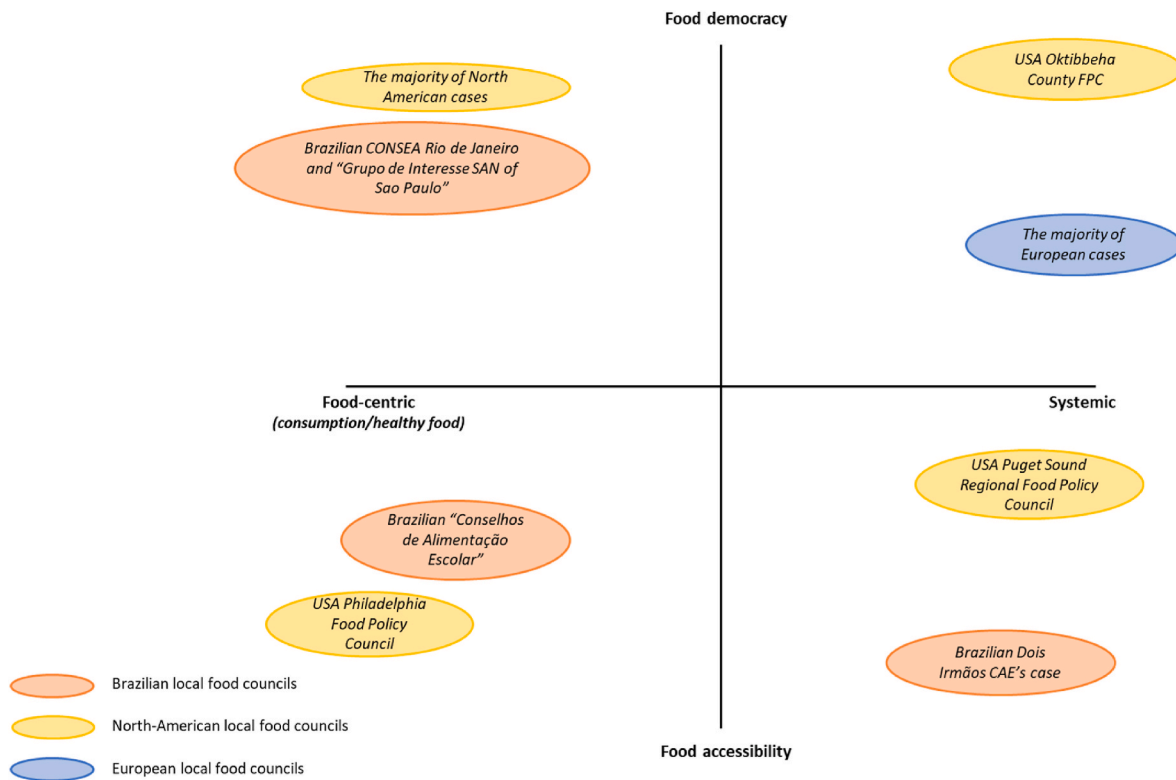


Fig. 3. Positioning of various empirical cases within our four framings of agrifood transitions.

and municipal levels. Many LFCs in North America also adopt this framing. For example, the Philadelphia Food Policy Council places a strong emphasis on access to healthy food, “envisioning a future where everyone can access and afford healthy, sustainable, culturally appropriate, local, and equitable food” (Prové et al., 2019). This same framing, mainly focusing on healthy food access, is similarly recognised in certain reviews and surveys (Harper et al., 2009; Scherb et al., 2012; Calancie et al., 2018; Bassarab et al., 2019).

However, some studies both in Brazil and North America present contrasting viewpoints to these prevailing framings and rather echo the (second) systemic – accessibility framing. In the case of the CAE of Dois Irmãos, located in the southern region of Brazil, the members displayed an exceptional level of commitment in their efforts to incorporate family farming products into school meal programs, surpassing the 30% requirement stipulated by legislation (Triches and Schneider, 2015). They worked diligently to improve the products’ quality definition in public procurement notices, effectively navigating bureaucratic hurdles. According to the authors, school feeding has the potential to bridge formerly separate concerns, such as production, rural development, consumption, and public health, offering a more comprehensive and systemic perspective of the agrifood system and therefore of its transition. In the Puget Sound Regional Food Policy Council in the USA, certain interviewees expressed caution about prioritising food justice over economic returns for local farmers (Horst, 2017). The author interprets this perspective as largely apolitical, as it does not address the structural causes of food-related disparities. Addressing these structural causes should de facto lead to escape such false tensions between food accessibility and farmers’ income. For this reason, food justice represents a more radical orientation compared to a focus on sustainable localised food systems.

The third type of framing we identified is the food-centric – food democracy framing. Notably prominent in North America, it can be exemplified by the Toronto Youth Food Policy Council. This council actively strives to involve historically marginalised groups in discussions concerning food, including indigenous peoples, racialised communities,

immigrants, and low-income individuals (Halliday, 2019). A remarkable example in Brazil is the CONSEA Rio de Janeiro, where the actions extend beyond ensuring equal food access, emphasising food democracy. Tângari (2019) indeed observed an evolution in the council’s priorities over time, expanding from its initial focus on combating hunger and food insecurity to encompass other issues such as promoting healthy diets and urban agriculture. The council includes urban and family farmers’ organisations, each holding two seats since 2011, and also counts consumer movements and nutrition and health institutions/agencies among its members. A similar framing can be seen in the Food and Nutritional Security Interest Group in São Paulo, where Ribeiro and Bógus (2021) found that social participation was a key mechanism for involving representatives from civil society and public authorities in shaping municipal policies and strengthening food and nutritional security more broadly. Activists played a leading role in enhancing social participation, creating spaces for coordinating themes and developing skills through technical training and knowledge dissemination.

Our last type of framing is the systemic – food democracy framing. Thompson et al. (2020) describe the Oktibbeha County Food Policy Council’s specific focus on supporting Black farmers and ensuring access to healthy and fresh food. This targeted perspective aims to address racial disparities in the food system while also promoting urban agriculture. In European articles, a significant emphasis is placed on the development of local and sustainable food systems, fostering engagement from economic stakeholders and civil society. This overarching theme centres on sustainable agriculture, short supply chains, and the relocalisation of food within sustainable food systems. We opted to place European cases within the “food democracy” quadrant despite variations in addressing the issue of food democracy across different cases because, in each instance, efforts are being made to encourage involvement from both economic stakeholders and civil society. One notable example can be found in Ghent (Prové et al., 2019), where efforts are directed towards the development of a local, sustainable food system integrated with urban agriculture. Forno and Maurano (2016) also highlight the

enhancement of grassroots initiatives related to food security, sustainable diets, and food democracy, encouraging more sustainable consumption patterns in Pisa. This approach, as noted by the authors, underscores health and sustainability issues, with a strong focus on understanding, coordinating, and expanding grassroots initiatives. The case of Castel di Giudice explores a range of topics, from social agriculture to short food supply chains, all aimed at integrating food as a territorial asset into local development and territorial attractiveness (Mazzocchi and Marino, 2019).

The absence of the notions of "ecologisation" or "(agro)ecological transition" within research dedicated to local food councils represents a notable gap in the current research landscape. This gap is also evident in the activities of LFCs themselves, highlighting a missed opportunity to comprehensively address the process of ecologicalising agri-food systems. While some studies may concentrate on the sustainability of specific products or aspects of production, they often neglect a more holistic perspective that includes the ecological dimensions of farming and consumption practices. For instance, the St. Louis Food Policy Coalition primarily concentrates on eliminating obstacles to urban agriculture, enhancing the availability of local, healthy food, and supporting environmentally responsible farmers (Vatterott, 2019). Nonetheless, this does not include an explicit invitation to engage in a more extensive transition toward ecological practices within agri-food systems.

## 7. Discussion and conclusions

Numerous authors have previously characterised local food councils in terms of their links to governments and types of functions, based on North American cases, leading them to distinguish between government-led and grassroots/civil society-led food councils (Bassarab et al., 2019). Our more comprehensive approach, enlarged to Europe and Brazil, has added depth to this categorisation by revealing that government-led local food councils fall into two categories: those established by governmental decree or law to control/evaluate a policy, and those established by a local government to implement a food strategy (part 4 of this article). On the other hand, less institutionalised food councils can also be subdivided into grassroots/civil society-led food councils and those initiated within research or action-research networks and projects. These distinctions have allowed us to define four types of local food councils that articulate their sets of functions with their origins and degrees of institutionalisation. We have not only recategorised sets of functions compared to previous reviews, but we have also connected them to the unique origins, degrees of institutionalisation and contexts of food councils. We showed that the more institutionalised food councils primarily concentrate on the implementation, control, monitoring, and evaluation of planning strategies (most of the cases in North America and Europe) and of food policies and programs (as is the case in Brazil). Conversely, the less institutionalised food councils in all three regions engage in advocacy for political change and various activities not directly related to public action and policy, such as resource sharing, programs/initiatives' development, implementation and support, stakeholder coordination, and the promotion of public awareness and education. We emphasised the significance of adopting a dynamic approach. Analysing trajectories is necessary to understand both the consistencies and disruptions within a local food council's path, as well as the (changing) contextual environment in which it operates and the reciprocal influences with this environment.

In all three regions, local food councils are also often studied through the lens of composition, participation, and food democracy. Most articles within this literature delve into the examination of their composition, which appears to fall into two broad categories, as it is either defined by legal or formal frameworks, such as in the case of Brazil and many institutional instances in North America, or more flexible and adaptable over time, and inclusive towards informal networks and grassroots initiatives, as seen in less institutional local food councils (part 5 of this article). Nearly all articles address the issue of balance

across sectors or components of the food system (e.g., production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management) and various types of actors (e.g., government, economic entities, civil society). However, there is a trend to adopt a multistakeholderism perspective, emphasising the representation of different components and actors within the system and neglecting less institutionalised constituencies, as is increasingly observed at the international level (Valente, 2018). The diversity of actors involved is often reduced to predefined categories, thus neglecting the internal social diversity within these categories, and to only representative "stakeholders", thus excluding *concerned* actors and communities, as is often more largely the case in participatory approaches (Lamine, 2018).

In link with these perspectives on composition, participation is often examined through dichotomous perspectives, such as inclusive versus exclusive participation, participation in discussions and debates versus participation in decision-making, and meaningful versus "superficial" participation. Meaningful participation is considered by many authors as favouring food democracy (Sieveking, 2019; Michel et al., 2022; Schiff et al., 2022). If we follow a "strong" definition of food democracy which "ideally means that all members of an agri-food system have equal and effective opportunities for participation in shaping that system, as well as knowledge about the relevant alternative ways of designing and operating the system" (Hassanein, 2008:83), participation should not only favour capacity building and knowledge exchange but also lead to a real involvement of the food councils' members in the design of policies and strategies as well as in decision-making. Moreover, knowledge exchange should include the recognition of the diverse types of knowledge beyond the "classical" expert one, i.e., also include marginalised people's knowledge. However, most articles approach food democracy in mostly procedural and "managerial" ways, suggesting that a balanced composition of the instance and good participation techniques and rules would ensure food democracy. The effectiveness of such techniques and rules is rarely discussed as such: how is the application of these rules controlled, if at all? How are the priorities and voices of marginalised groups ensured to be heard and prioritized? How is it ensured that the spaces and modes of operation of the instances are appropriate for all and not intimidating to some participants? Some articles show that meaningful participation involves tangible and active efforts (such as offering childcare, gathering over meals, collectively selecting meeting times and spaces, or establishing a shared lexicon for inclusivity) to make participation feasible, especially for marginalised groups or persons. However, rarely is food democracy considered in a substantial and robust manner, which would require addressing power relations and the fundamental human right to food. Referring to Nancy Fraser's three dimensions of social justice (representation, recognition, and redistribution) (Fraser, 2005), it seems evident that the third dimension of redistribution, which relates to power relations and the right to food, is much less discussed. Moreover, beyond these three dimensions and beyond the "food justice" frame, a right-to-food approach should also include the issue of accountability from governments. This lack of consideration of power relations, right to food and accountability suggests the prevailing of a thin (rather than thick) vision of food democracy.

Regarding the framings of agri-food transitions (part 6 of this article), we demonstrated that, even though these framings are not the primary focus of this literature, the analysis of their thematic priorities allows to identify four contrasting perspectives: (i) food-centric – accessibility, (ii) systemic – accessibility, (iii) food-centric – food democracy and (iv) systemic – food democracy (Fig. 3). The majority of North American food councils prioritise food-centric issues, inclusivity, empowerment and democracy. Most Brazilian LFCs (namely school feeding councils) concentrate on food-centric and accessibility issues, covering aspects like quality, hygiene, regularity, and acceptability, with some examples that work with more systemic framings. In Europe, there is relatively less emphasis on equity, poverty, and accessibility, and more attention directed towards coordinating and empowering

citizens and stakeholders. While sustainability stands as a central objective for many food councils, most analyses lack an in-depth exploration of sustainability, often failing to address the dynamic aspects of sustainability transitions and the intricate mechanisms and processes within these transitions (Lamine and Marsden, 2023). Moreover, the ecological dimensions often get reduced to a narrow focus on procurement choices and (not always) on supporting environmentally responsible farmers, and most cases fall short of actively promoting a broader concept of transition and transformative change. In Brazilian cases, agroecological transitions are more prominently featured when compared to other regions, as a result of the alliances between family farming, agroecology, and the stakes and claims of food and nutritional security (Lamine, 2020). In Europe, although agroecological transitions are gaining ground as a narrative and are even a keyword of public policies in France for example, they remain overlooked by the local food councils' literature.

Neither is the concrete impact of local food councils on agri-food transitions directly tackled by the literature. Many articles predominantly evaluate their effectiveness in terms of impact on policies, often overlooking their influence on the broader food systems. Furthermore, the examination of policy impact tends to focus on municipal policies and short-term effects, while the reach of food councils extends to a multitude of institutions, policies, and programs, and their impact is frequently felt over the medium or long term. A food council operating in a specific area represents just one among a diversity of forums and arenas, and it is crucial to consider the complementarity and alliances that exist across these various forums and arenas (Huttunen et al., 2022). In this context, unlike what we refer to above as "thin food democracy" primarily defined by procedural criteria and rules, food councils can contribute to "thickening" food democracy. However, such a "thick food democracy" approach requires not only a heightened level of reflexivity regarding the underlying assumptions of participation at the scale of each instance or arena, as mentioned above, but also transversal reflexivity, so that the different initiators and facilitators of such forums and arenas come together to collectively discuss and deliberate on their complementarity or potential divergences as well as on their potential impact.

In short, the three analytical entrees explored in this article offer an innovative interpretation that extends beyond the current understanding of local food councils and the descriptive approaches found in most other literature reviews. Our analysis underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of local food councils within diverse contexts, emphasising inclusive and transformative engagement for both thickening food democracy and fostering more ecological agri-food systems.

Our findings not only confirm previous observations regarding the limited representation of rural cases in the existing literature (Calancie et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2020; Schiff et al., 2022), but also reveals a disparity between the reality of concrete cases and the literature, particularly in the case of Brazil. Indeed, school feeding councils are found in all states and municipalities in Brazil, encompassing both urban and rural areas. However, only a scant number of articles deals with rural ones: the lack of studies thus appears as rather generated by a lack of research interest than by the reality. In Europe, the emphasis on urban areas seems to align more closely with the prevalence of local food councils in cities and urban regions, partly due to the planning-oriented perspective mentioned earlier. However, rural food councils probably suffer from a double invisibility: first because they are more often unformalised (partly due to lack of resources), and second because researchers most often work and live in urban areas. Our inclusion of a few rural cases suggests specific rural characteristics that warrant further investigation into rural LFCs: how may rural food councils impact local farmers' livelihoods and practices? Do they adopt a more "systemic" approach when framing agri-food transitions – which could be due to

their close geographical proximity to the productive sector and its actors –? These questions represent potential avenues for further research on rural food councils, whether in terms of analysing the existing literature or conducting on-the-ground investigations into these food councils themselves.

Within and beyond rural cases, another research avenue involves delving into "informal" councils, including those emanating not only from civil society but also from action-research or research-driven initiatives (Lamine et al., 2022), and their specificities: do they approach the issues of participation and inclusion differently? Like rural LFCs, do they also adopt a more "systemic" approach to agri-food transitions?

As mentioned earlier, we also suggest that future studies should explore the specificities of other European and Latin American countries, as well as those in Asia, Africa, and Oceania. Finally, the process of professionalisation within local food councils is another captivating issue for further research. This exploration could tackle the diversity (in a given country and across different countries, especially those not addressed in this article) and the changes in the professional profiles of their facilitators/coordinators, as well as the role of devoted training programs and the influences of different national or international institutions and networks (including private foundations) on this process of professionalisation.

#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Karine Nunes:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Claire Lamine:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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## Appendix 1. Extract from the descriptive table (3 articles, out of 32)

Geographic area	Id	Article	Empiric cases	Comments	Context	Discipline	Method	Main objective of the article	FC form	Origin and degree of institut.	Functions	How the participation is tackled by the LFC	Author's point of view on participation	Thematic priorities	Author's point of view on agri-food transitions
North America	1	<a href="#">Calancie et al. (2017)</a>	Adams County FPC	USA	rural setting, 9,5% pop. food insecure	Medicine (community health)	Case study, interviews	How a rural FPC facilitates cross-sector partnerships and influences food system change	13 members (academics, agr ext, educ, food access org, health care, nonprofit), monthly meetings, without wg	Created by county's proclamation in 2009	Sharing resources, expertise, ideas and information, Development, support and maintain of food access-related programs	Feeling of egalitarianism (small size) + reach out under-represented communities through their programs	Egalitarianism: group cohesion and member empowerment (community coalition effectiveness)	Health and sustainability	Strong focus on health (potential of improving health outcomes in communities)
North America	2	<a href="#">Levkoe et al. (2021)</a>	Thunder Bay and Area Food Strategy	Canada	Mid-sized city in Northwestern Ontario, 110k inhab., rural townships + First Nations	Political sciences	Case study	Gap: little quantitative or mixed methods research about the relationships that constitute FPGs or the degree to which they achieve cross-sectoral integration	Informal network of diverse organisations and Members: key sectors (agri, indig, economic dev, policy, public health, non-profit, research, educ, reg gov)	Establishment in 2007 after decades of collaboration and community-lead efforts Official endorsement by the City of Thunder Bay and 5 rural municipalities since 2014	Collect, integrate, and disseminate info, Support food systems initiatives in the region, Lobbying (ensure that municipal and regional policy and governance supported healthy, equitable and sustainable food systems)	Focus on cross-sectoral integration	–	Building community economic development, Ensuring social justice, Fostering population health, Celebrating culture and collaboration, Preserving environmental integrity	–
North America	3	<a href="#">Sands et al. (2016)</a>	Holyoke Food and Fitness Policy Council	USA	Small city built on papel mills, immigrant workers (Germany, Ireland, Canada, Poland and Puerto Rico), inequality, poorest city in the Commonwealth	Political sciences	Case study, participatory evaluation (docs, interviews, community dialogue)	To describe some of the accomplishments and challenges faced by the HFFPC	Groupe of diverse dedicated people convened by 3 npo, wide range of resident, agency, university and city partners 3 wg: youth residents, community resident and agency members	It was a community coalition: designed with bottom-up organizing and decision-making (networking, coop, collab)	Create leadership and advocacy opportunities, training, outreach, awareness-building, and a funding structure for community-identified food projects lobbying (influence policy agenda)	They meet over a healthy, culturally relevant meal, offer childcare, hold meetings at convenient times for community parents and youth leaders	Challenge: galvanizing community engagement lack of focus on creating and supporting Latino residents in nonprofit careers "Service" model	Improve access to healthy, affordable, culturally relevant and locally grown food	–



## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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