

LEUVEN GYMKHANA 2.0 REPORT & CONCLUSIONS. RECOMMENDATIONS TO RECOVER THE "IMAC" IN THE GOVERNANCE OF THE FOOD SYSTEM IN LEUVEN

Report by Clara Medina-García, Sharmada Nagarajan, Lariza Castillo, Pieter Van den Broeck & Erik Béatse reflecting on the work with the Leuven Gymkhana 2.0 team

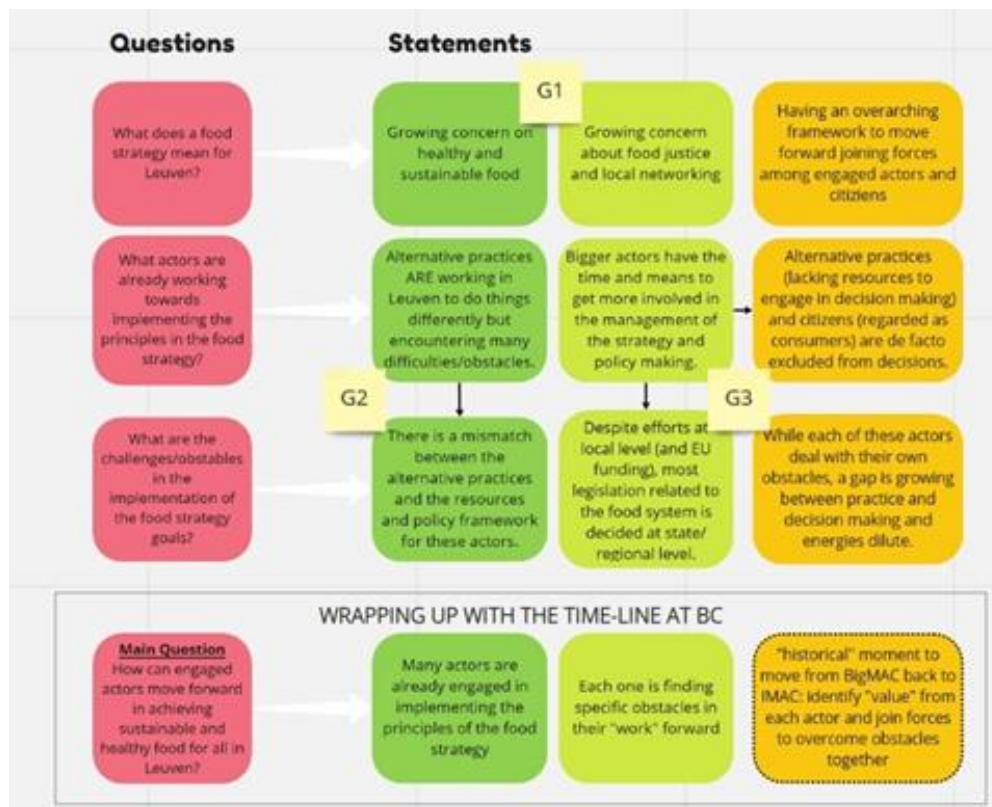
INTRODUCTION

We are a group of researchers from the Department of Architecture at KU Leuven investigating the Food strategy and the Food programme of the Leuven 2030 Roadmap as presumable examples of innovative multi-actor collaborations. We try to understand the relation between Leuven 2030 and the Food Strategy, the exchange between them, and their influence on local policy and governance innovation in Leuven.

The [Leuven Gymkhana](#) events ([treasure hunt](#) in December 2020, [webinar](#) in 2021, [Leuven Gymkhana 2.0 tours and closing event](#) in May 2021) were both an output of our research and a means to share and discuss and enrich our results with people involved in the implementation of the food strategy Food Connects and the wider population of Leuven. With the development of the Leuven Gymkhana, we wanted to identify and connect with the actors involved in the implementation of the food strategy in Leuven and further research on and discuss these issues with them.

In the Leuven Gymkhana 1.0 we made posters for people to find and follow in the city. Each poster shared findings from our research and raised questions for participants to react online. The Leuven Gymkhana 2.0, learning from the limitations to drive a debate with the treasure hunt, turned more interactive with 3 guided walking tours, aiming to drive conversations on the go and build together the story of the Food strategy in Leuven. **G1** aimed at reopening the debate with the broad population about what sustainable and healthy food means, with special care for addressing nuances and diversity of approaches and perspectives in this field, and also about accessibility to such food for all in Leuven (food justice). With **G2** we evidenced that there are interesting practices already building an alternative food system in Leuven and set the spotlight on them, while trying to better understand what makes them different to mainstream food

businesses and the difficulties and obstacles they are encountering in the way. **G3** wraps-up the debates raised in G1 and G2 and links back to the implementation of the food strategy and tries to understand the current situation, in which we identify a “split” in the “innovative multi-actor collaboration” (IMAC). The following image summarises the main questions and statements addressed:



In summary, our conclusions from the analysis in Leuven are that:

- Leuven has an experience in governance innovation and specifically in connection with food (with important steps taken towards food sovereignty).
- The current policies and plans related to the food strategy in Leuven are only there thanks to 25 years of experimentation in these fields (governance and building an alternative food system).
- Leuven is now in a crucial moment, in which different actors involved in these processes are taking parallel separate trajectories to speed up their individual work. This is not bad in itself, but endangers the previous advancements in terms of innovative multi-actor collaboration and connecting people and food.

This evolution might not be bad in itself, but **requires a moment of reflexion about further steps**. It is necessary to learn from the roles, capacities and resources that the different actors that were and are involved in the process bring forward. As such, the

innovative and collaborative character of the process that characterises Leuven and its food strategy can be maintained.

SUMMARY OF THE LEUVEN GYMKHANA RESULTS

During our action research trajectory in Leuven in 2019-2021 we reconstructed the multi-level processes of urban governance and alternative practices building an alternative food system in Leuven. We summarized these findings and our interpretations about the process in a timeline: <https://kuleuven.box.com/s/eakv9x62rinn3gwzlhnm3txuagrm6i>

From our analysis of the trajectory of the food strategy, we identified three stages of institutionalization since the initial mobilization, which are clearly shaped by the changing relations and collaborations among actors in the food system of Leuven.

The making of the food strategy involving several stakeholders related to the food system can be considered a first step.

In this step the initiators of the strategy, individuals and organisations interested in expanding the reach of sustainable food and CSA like BC and Rikolto, reached out to Leuven 2030 and its network to involve as many voices as possible.

The making of the strategy in this fashion is in itself an innovative multi-actor collaboration that managed to involve many people that were previously excluded from policy-making into the process, raising their voices and empowering them.

However, during the workshops and discussions in which the strategy was drafted, consensus seeking already reshaped the original interests for the transformation of the food system into the objectives expressed in the final document. For instance, topics like meat and dairy alternatives in diets, sustainable meat production, organic and regenerative agriculture, CSA, etc. as essential criteria to achieve sustainable and healthy food in the city faded away and were not evident in the final text.

While the strategy mentions ongoing alternative practices and initiatives in the city as successful examples that contribute to its goals, it does not emphasize on the need for binding policy changes that could alter or challenge the conventional food system strategies and refrains from addressing the diversity of the city's population in terms of diet, food habits and socio-economic backgrounds.

A summary & comparison of the evolution of the objectives of the strategy is available here:
<https://kuleuven.box.com/s/hngizk8uqxlg8wsmpugvl870fwc8yrcn>

A second step of institutionalization occurred when Leuven 2030 translated the original food strategy into the logics of its 2030 Roadmap to design the lines of action for the newly created Programme of Sustainable and Healthy Eating.

For example, instead of preventing food waste, the goals look to *reduce* food waste. Similarly, commitment to short chains and food justice for all disappeared from the goals of the Programme. As well as the elements from the original text that cared for the well-being and fair distribution of risks among actors in the change, especially farmers.

And when Leuven 2030 expected to mobilise “site coordinators” that would support the Programme Facilitators, as part of the Roadmap implementation plan from Leuven 2030, the food programme became an exception since it had this rich network of actors and citizens from the city that helped publish the food strategy.

So once again this becomes an innovative case where the network of stakeholders who participated to develop the strategy continued to volunteer as the ‘cockpit’ or steering committee to support the programme facilitator. However, since most other programmes did not manage to mobilise such a network, the work and internal governance of Leuven 2030 were restructured once again so that the general coordinating team would support the programme facilitators to maximise their work by finding synergies among programmes and identifying and activating leverage projects with the maximum impact . As a consequence, the cockpit is no longer active in defining the approach for implementation of the goals of the programme.

The Food Resource Hub, in partnership with De Clique, is an example of Leuven 2030's current project-based approach, where the themes of food and circularity are combined. The project continues to fit within the existing system, leading to monetization of waste and viewing circularity from a market-oriented perspective. It does not challenge the system or raise questions on how to prevent the waste instead. Also, the project is trying to solve a “new” problem rather than addressing the problems that actors in Leuven's food system are facing and building from successful local alternative practices.

We so identify 3 limitations in the way Leuven 2030's food programme is implemented:

- 1) citizens are viewed as consumers while businesses are viewed as partners.
- 2) consumers and consumer behavior are disconnected from decisions pertaining to the food system- especially food production.
- 3) alternative practices are acknowledged as contributing to the goals of the strategy but are not integrated with its implementation.

The last stage of institutionalization occurs in parallel when specific projects and implementation actions are mobilized within the Food programme of Leuven 2030, but also as the City Hall adapts the original strategy and Leuven 2030's roadmap in the making of the Climate Policy 2020-25.

This process is affected by the project logic and aims of each of the actors involved in the further implementation of the strategy towards maximizing impact of their actions and moving further fast. As it can be imagined, the specific logics of each actor strongly influence the further translation and institutionalization of the strategy.

What we learnt from this process was that, as the strategy evolved, the IMAC character of the strategy was turning into a “Big-MAC”. While more resources are made available for specific projects, the project logic also fades away part of the richness and systemic approach of the original aspirations of the strategy. In addition, while larger actors have more resources and time to participate in formal decision-making processes, smaller actors lack the means to do so.

In contrast to this, alternative practices keep attempting to challenge the food system and simultaneously educate consumers to alter their choices for healthier options while also facing difficulties to reach the resources mobilized by the Leuven 2030 network.

For example, a larger actor like Rikolto established Kort’Om Leuven, a business-to-business logistic platform to enable and support short-chain supply. Smaller actors like Bar Stan, a local restaurant, continued to innovate in their own capacity, collaborating with BoerEnCompagnie to provide seasonal menus, and trying to influence consumer behaviour and prevent food waste. Boerencompagnie has built and continues to expand its community of harvesters - consciously avoiding calling them customers- basing interactions on solidarity and trust. Similarly, they have been engaging and educating children on farming and CSA principles under the BoerEnBuiten NGO, which they also use as a platform to expand their community. Also shops like the Food Hub and Content and initiatives like Food Teams, Solikoop and Korst at Hal5, all stops in the Gymkhana, have strong social and sustainability principles that relegate economic objectives to a secondary position as they work with and for citizens and the local community.

Though these actors are primarily businesses, taking the legal form of cooperatives or non-for-profit organisations, they also ensure a strong connection with the community of citizens and other actors who work with them. This enables them to function as successful social enterprises and experiment themselves with democratic governance. Along with similar other alternative practices, an alternative food system continues to grow within the city, that challenges the mainstream agri-industrial food system.

In conclusion, the current stage is marked by **an unfortunate gradual disconnection between the actors that are taking decisions and implementing the strategy, and the alternative practices and individual citizens that had triggered the strategy in the first moments**. Consequently, two (or three) parallel trajectories take shape, splitting the initial “IMAC”. So even though all actors, including the City, Leuven 2030 and alternative practices, are working towards similar collective goals, the difference between the practical and day-to-day approach of bottom-up initiatives and the long-term strategic and project-based vision of the City and Leuven 2030 has somehow reduced the collaborative intensity and impact of the implementation of the strategy.

In the next section we explain how we believe the actors involved in the food strategy, can convert these challenges into opportunities and figure out a way for broader discussions to reactivate the richness of the food strategy moving forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO RECOVER THE “IMAC” IN THE GOVERNANCE OF THE FOOD SYSTEM IN LEUVEN

1. In relation to the approach to sustainability and changing the food system

The approach towards sustainability in terms of climate neutrality is too limiting, especially in terms of transforming the predominant agri-industrial food system, which needs a systemic change.

- Citizens should be incorporated as “actors” and partners of the strategy, not just “consumers” that need to be “taught” to change their behaviour.
- The demand is there already, so show and upscale the critical thinkers and the alternative practices that are being able to meet this alternative approach.

Further potential actions to leverage changing the food system:

- Force the conventional food system to change. Regulating is one of the specific areas of work of public administration that should be explored for this. Although the research has shown that many regulations pertaining the food system are decided at supra-local level, some practices could be encouraged at the local level. Some of the lines that could be explored are linked to implementing some of the practices alternatives are already experimenting with, like transparency, certification and information about food, and implementation of ethical regulations and implementation of sustainable food reporting the way SSE economy already does. For example, transparency in food retailers and restaurants could be forced at the local level by obliging to show specific information about the origin and production system of food sold. An inspiration: <https://www.agronewscomunitatvalenciana.com/alboraya-es-reconocida-con-el-sello-iberian-real-food-por-el-papel-de-su-industria-agroalimentaria>
- A special push is needed to help the productive system transform into sustainable food production. Increasing “local” food production is not enough if the ways and principles applied in the production don’t integrate sustainability from a broad perspective. Neither is it relying on local producers to transform as demand requests it. The actors implementing the food strategy can mobilise specific programmes and efforts in this line, and visualise existing alternative experiences already building an alternative food system in Leuven as inspiring references.

2. In relation to the approach to building an alternative food system

Efforts at the local level should be set to identify “local alternatives” that are working to advance in the transformation of the food system and support them instead of trying to “invent” new problems and projects to solve them. The experience so far in Leuven and the learnings from the development of the Food Strategy can in themselves be very valuable insights to inspire other practices and cities and upscale efforts. Ongoing alternative initiatives like the ones identified in our research are in themselves experiments of democratic and sustainable innovation from which a lot can be learned and replicated.

- The first step to support ongoing successful initiatives is to learn about their difficulties and find the way help overcoming them. There is no need for the administration or the Food Programme to “find” new problems and invent solutions to be implemented in Leuven from scratch. The debates triggered during the Leuven Gymkhana already shed light on some of these constraints.
- What our research and conversations with these practices has shown is that what they need is not just financial support for their main activities, in which they are already succeeding, but other resources that can help them expand their reach and participate in the IMAC again:
 - Infrastructure (like warehouses, machinery, or meeting rooms)
 - Integration of their activities in other social services and programmes, for instance in educational and professional capacitation and employment programmes, to maximise their multi-dimensional and social impact.
 - Emancipate the food strategy from the City with the establishment of a “Food Hub”, a physical working and meeting space for actors working in the transformation of the food system, including Food Programme facilitators. Hal5 is already playing this role to a certain extent, gathering different initiatives related to food, in connection with the community and boosting further synergies among initiatives, like Solikoop or Korst – Boerencompagnie. A further inspiration: Mares Madrid, Mar de Alimentación <https://maresmadrid.es/alimentacion/>.
 - Further support with human resources to document what is being done, identify limitations and potential synergies, provide practical support and facilitate exchange AMONG actors in the food system.
 - Alternative spaces and opportunities for participation in decision-making instead of time-consuming meetings.

3. In relation to the governance of the food strategy and its implementation

No single actor can do this alone.

We've identified that the actors involved in the implementation of the food strategy face different obstacles depending on their range of action, with many mismatches between the "alternative practices" experimented and the existing regulations. In addition, many regulations pertaining the local food system are decided at supra-local level, mainly because regulations happen in the economic field, like those related to agriculture and waste management as economic activities, regulations on public procurement, or those regulating taxation and trading activities.

- Recovering the IMAC is the fastest and more just way of advancing in the transition. For this, the "super-powers" and unique resources of each type of actor involved in the implementation of the food strategy shall be identified and potentiated in the development of further synergetic multi-actor collaborations.

Specific potential roles of different actors in urban action:

- Leuven 2030 has the potential to act as a collaborative platform that can connect actors, facilitate joint actions and provide with extra resources to all the actors in the network, as already demonstrated in early stages of the strategy.
- The City, as state administration, has the unique capacity to regulate through policy making, as well as to upscale and connect the local level into the supra-local level and lead collaborations at the regional level.
- Ongoing alternative practices have the practical knowledge and proven experience on how to advance in the transition, while they have the capacity to connect with and involve the wider citizenship in the broader debate and action.

Multi-level governance and lobbying at the supra-local level:

- Efforts at the local level should develop in parallel to building alliances and collaboration with other cities and regional actors to lobby together to change the supra-local regulations. For example, apart from the already integration of Leuven in international networks of cities like the Milan Pact or the Covenant of Majors, a specific Flemish Network of cities and regions for agroecological transition could be set up to exchange experiences and join lobbying efforts (one exiting already in Spain as a reference: <https://www.ciudadesagroecologicas.eu/>).
- Also, regional regulations could be developed as an intermediate step, for instance, with the development of a regional sustainable certification like the one developed in Valencia.