

Menu of Food Voices



Transforming the Food System Bottom-Up

Food Voices Coalition

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Summary of Menu of Food Voices

The *Food Voices Coalition* was formed in 2024 by seven organizations from six European countries. We are united in our ambition to transform the food system by putting the voices of those most affected by its failures at the centre. The coalition developed a manifesto as common ground for our advocacy work, and a series of case studies based on our local experiences. Each case study explored how to listen, empower, and mobilize communities in shaping healthier, fairer, and more sustainable food systems. A major shift from the common practice of relying solely on retailers and supermarkets to make decisions about what we eat.

Seven unique approaches

Each organisation worked with local communities and took a unique approach. From giving young people leadership roles (Green REV Institute, Poland), shaping responsible supermarket practices (ALTAA, France), exploring community-led food networks (Foodrise UK), developing a 'democratic supermarket' (Foodrise EU, Netherlands), advocating positive promotions on healthy, sustainable food (CAN, France), reframing conflicts related to pollution (CECU, Spain) and linking transition efforts to ecological and social justice (Terral, Italy).

Cross-Cutting Conclusions

Our main conclusions based on all seven cases are:

- Food insecurity and unsustainable diets are not consumer “choices” but structural outcomes. Solutions must shift from blaming individuals to *rebalancing power* in the food chain. **It is a systemic problem, not individual responsibility.**
- Even within a globalized retail system, local supermarkets and community initiatives can be entry points for systemic change and proof-of-concepts for regulation. **Local action can be a lever for systemic change.**
- All cases are a testimony of how food environment approaches can work in practice. Food is not only about health, but also about *rights, climate, dignity, democracy, and social cohesion*. **Food is a multi-dimensional issue.**
- Experiences in each country show that **participation and ownership matter**. Change happens when communities co-create solutions and take leadership, not when solutions are imposed from outside.
- Building **alliances across divides is key**. By bringing together farmers, environmental activists, youth, consumers, and local governments, we build stronger, more resilient movements that bring together perspectives normally lost in the system. These voices reveal where responsibility and power truly lie and can thus fundamentally challenge dominant narratives.

Food as a human right

This *Menu of Food Voices* shows that transforming Europe's food system requires bottom-up power, cross-sector alliances, and new narratives that position food as a human right. The coalition's case studies prove that when people most affected by food system failures are heard and empowered, they generate innovative, practical, and just solutions, from democratic supermarkets to cross-community solidarity.

Seven coalition partners

The *Food Voices Coalition* consists of seven non-governmental organisations from six European countries. Each organisation differs in size and type (network, federation, coalition, campaign organization, think tank).



ALTAIA from France (Alliance pour les Transitions Agricoles & Alimentaires) is a young alliance bringing together civil-society organisations, local authorities, businesses, researchers and NGOs to accelerate food and farming transitions.



CAN-F, the Climate Action Network in France unites associations involved in the fight against climate change and for an ecological, inclusive, and just transition.



CECU in Spain is a consumer organisation (Confederation of Consumers and Users), member of BEUC and Consumers International. By looking at the transformation of food systems from a consumer perspective, the need for interconnected action becomes clear—to simultaneously reform production, distribution, and consumption.



Foodrise UK (formerly Feedback) is an organization that has a lot of experience with campaigns (waste, scorecard supermarkets, fish, and big livestock) as well as with local food alternatives and direct work in communities. A subsidiary was set up in 2022 in the Netherlands to stay connected with Europe.



Foodrise EU (formerly Feedback EU) has experience with research and publications (scorecard supermarkets, Meat us halfway, unfair competition and trade) and campaigns targeting retailers. It has started conducting pilots at the local level. Foodrise EU coordinates the Food Voices project.



Green REV Institute is a Polish think tank promoting vegan and healthy food, especially targeting youth, local governments, and decision makers. They combine movement building and advocacy. They have experience of doing research and campaigns and do active lobbying at the EU level.



Terra! from Italy is an environmental organisation, working since 2008 at local, national and international level on campaigns to protect the environment and for an ecological and just transition of food systems.

Supported by



Our work to form the coalition was supported by Healthy Food Healthy Planet (HFHP), located in Geneva. HFHP is a Pan-European movement uniting civil society organisations and funders so that healthy, just and sustainable food environments become the norm and harmful agriculture ends.

Amuse-bouche – Our collective journey



Group photo of the Food Voices Coalition team. Source: Lisette Gast.

The story began at a co-creation workshop organized by Healthy Food Healthy Planet (HFHP) in Geneva in September 2023. Seven European NGOs working on food justice decided to develop a joint proposal on the role of supermarkets and retailers. Following a grant made by HFHP, an inception workshop was organized in April 2024 in The Hague to get clarity on what exactly we wanted to achieve and to organize the work. We also chose a name: the Food Voices Coalition!

Our original aim was to campaign jointly to pressure supermarkets and retailers with our demands for healthy, sustainable, fair, and affordable products, and to contribute to the transformation of the food system. We realized we had to find a way to bridge the different scopes and working methods of the organizations. We merged the citizen voice approach with a focus on supermarkets. This led to many questions. How do we listen to people who are experiencing the impact of the current broken food system the most? How do we translate this into policy and demands for supermarkets? And how do we build partnerships and movements to amplify our demands?

In September 2024, we had to acknowledge that we needed much more time to establish a formal coalition that could campaign together. Instead of devising solutions, we wanted to know what people, those who suffer most from the system, really want and to include them in the transformation.

We decided to first draft a manifesto to have a common ground for advocacy work. In addition, we selected seven examples of our activities to learn more about listening to people, raising their voices and driving change from the bottom up. We agreed to compile our lessons learned in this Menu of Food Voices report. Food Voices, because our commitment to transforming the food system from the bottom up is a strong and unifying element in our work.

Most, if not all, of the lessons learned relate to power dynamics. We learned far more than we could capture in our case studies. We have incorporated reflection, and this has contributed to greater awareness and sensitivity in our approaches, which will influence our future work. That makes this Food Voices Coalition experience very valuable.

A collective endeavour

We would like to thank the following people who have played their part in this story:

Frank Mechielsen, former director of Feedback EU (now Foodrise EU), for his enthusiasm, vision, and can-do attitude that made him a driving force behind the creation of the Food Voices Coalition.

The Steering Committee members of the Food Voices Coalition: Anna Spurek, Jessica Sinclair Taylor, Fabio Ciconte, David Sanchez, Frank Mechielsen, Alizee Marceau and Benoît Granier for their time and input.

Anna Spurek, Morgan Janowicz, Federica Ferrario, Daniele Caucci, Eduardo Montero, Lucy Antal, Benoît Granier, and Alizée Marceau for their courageous participation in this coalition and sharing their valuable experiences, all of which contributed to making this journey exciting, new, and inspiring. There are more people to thank, who left prematurely due to changes in work. Thanks, Lucy, for also editing this Menu.

We wish to thank [Healthy Food Healthy Planet](#), for making it possible to embark on this adventure as the Food Voices Coalition. Diana Ugalde for listening, her willingness to find solutions and to accommodate our coalition needs. Lisette Gast for facilitating the inception workshop, her online writing sessions, and the workshop to work on the common denominators in the Menu of Food Voices. Christine Temmink for her contribution to teaching us how to integrate the learning questions into our work. We especially thank Claudia Giampietri for her vision and leadership of Healthy Food Healthy Planet, enabling us to experiment, test and find new ways to contribute to the transformation of the food system. Without Healthy Food Healthy Planet there would not have been the Food Voices Coalition.

Our thanks also go to the residents of Moerwijk, Netherlands; Stockbridge Village, Knowsley UK; the third municipality in Rome; student groups in Poland and France; and farmers in Spain who are the true voices of the Food Voices Coalition. Without their willingness to trust us and share their insights based on their personal experiences with the food system, we wouldn't have been able to compile this Food Voices Menu.

Edit Tuboly (Foodrise EU)

Coordinator Food Voices Coalition
September 2025

Starter – Our shared purpose

The journey to this Menu of Food Voices did not start with us. Over decades, people and organizations have tried to bring to the forefront the voices of citizens. Our democratic states are based on this principle. But as we will demonstrate, the food system is not democratic at all.

We're told that as consumers, we choose and determine what's sold in the stores. We are never asked what we actually want to eat. [Reports](#) show that 80% of the [food promotions](#) of supermarkets don't meet [WHO standards](#) for healthy eating. It's too salty, too sweet, too processed, too many artificial additives, and too much meat and dairy. No one would voluntarily choose to eat toxins and chemicals, even though we all do now. [Even babies](#) have [PFAS](#) in their blood. Our food system is responsible for [35% of global greenhouse gas emissions](#) while industrial livestock farming alone is responsible for about 15%, the same amount as the transportation sector. Why is it then so difficult to choose sustainably produced and distributed food that is affordable? Why isn't it available in every supermarket? Our food system exceeds all planetary boundaries. We have known the negative effects of our food system for over sixty years, since [Silent Spring](#) and the Report of the [Club of Rome](#). That is a long journey!

Why Food Voices?

The purpose of the project is to mobilize voices to enable choice and access to healthy, sustainable, and just food for all. The voices of those who understand and experience the failures of the dominant food system. Those voices that are seldom listened to: the voices of people living in deprived areas, with poor food environments.

The coalition values inclusiveness, transparency, and accountability, celebrates diversity, and respects and empowers democratic collaborations. We want to bring in the voices of people in the discussions about food system change. The coalition is built on trust, and the diverse organisations are united in working towards a sustainable and just food system. We've put our intention into our manifesto, that serves as the basis for our calls to action.

Food Voices Coalition Manifesto

Citizens' Voices for the Future of Food

Our Mission

We challenge the status quo of the food system and in particular the dominant retail system that maintains an unhealthy, unequal and unsustainable food system, by amplifying the voices of citizens and advocating food empowerment.

Why We Exist

The global food system is broken. It prioritizes profits over people, depletes natural resources, contributes to climate change and perpetuates social injustices. While corporations, policymakers, and global markets drive decisions, the voices of everyday citizens – who grow, harvest, and consume food – remain unheard. The Food Voices Coalition was formed to change that. The Food Voices Coalition consists of seven organisations in six European countries: Feedback EU, Feedback UK, Green REV Institute, Terra!, CECU (Federación de Consumidores y Usuarios), CAN France and ALTAA (Alliance pour les Transitions Agricoles et Alimentaires). We are here to make sure that people are at the heart of food conversations and decisions, not profit-driven interests.

Our Vision: Food Justice and Empowerment for All

Food is a fundamental human right. It connects us all, from farm to fork, shaping our communities, cultures, and well-being. Yet, today's food system fails the very people who rely on it most. We envision a world where food sovereignty, sustainability, and equity are central to every conversation and policy decision. A world where people – not corporations – tell the story of food justice.

Our Core Beliefs

1 Challenging Food Myths

For too long, the dominant narrative about food has been shaped by powerful interests, creating myths about what is healthy, sustainable, and accessible. We are committed to telling the real stories of the people behind our food: farmers, workers, families, and communities. It's time to dismantle these myths and unveil the truth.

2 From Food Emergency to Food Justice

Our food system is in crisis. From hunger and food insecurity to environmental degradation and labour exploitation, we are facing a global food emergency. We call on governments, policymakers, and international bodies to prioritise food as an urgent issue, requiring immediate, bold action.

3 Empowering Citizens

Every individual has the right to be part of shaping the future of food. We are here to hear and amplify the voices of citizens—those whose lives are directly impacted by the current system—so that they can be active participants in the solutions. We especially want to highlight voices that are usually not heard, such as women, young people and marginalised groups.

4 Making Retail Part of the Solution and Ensuring Healthy Food Environments

Retail is a crucial link between food producers and consumers. They must move beyond margins and become responsible players in addressing food justice. We challenge the retail sector to act as part of the solution, by fostering fair trade, reducing waste, supporting local producers, and promoting food that is sustainable, affordable, and accessible. Alternative, sustainable models of food production and distribution should be explored and supported.

5 Integrating Food as a Cross-Cutting Issue

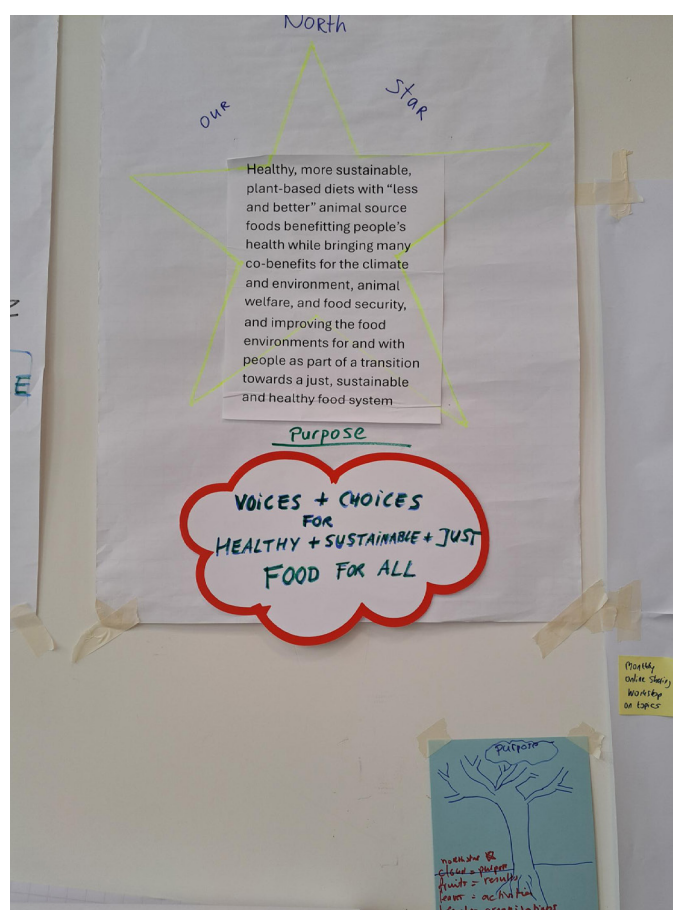
Food is not just a topic for agriculture or nutrition. It intersects with issues of climate change, health, social justice, economy, animal welfare and human rights. We advocate for a holistic approach, where food is considered a cross-cutting priority in every policy discussion, decision, and reform. Food helps to connect people. Growing food and cooking together support dialogues and social exchange among diverse groups, including marginalised people. Food helps to strengthen the social web.

Our North Star

Our ambitious goal is to mobilize voices to enable choice and access to healthy, sustainable, and just food for all.

Or, to describe it in even more ambitious terms, our North Star is:

Healthy, more sustainable, plant-based diets with “less and better” animal source foods benefitting people’s health while bringing many co-benefits for the climate and environment, animal welfare, and food security, and improving the food environments for and with people as part of a transition towards a just, sustainable, and healthy food system.



Our North Star. Source: Edit Tuboly.

Food environments approach

With our work of connecting local voices to food system transformation, we are all working, directly or indirectly, to improve food environments. Food environments are the interface between people and the food system and can be seen as a crucial strategic intervention point for change.

Food environments can be defined as the “physical, economic, political and socio-cultural context in which consumers engage with the food system to make their decisions about acquiring, preparing and consuming food” (HLPE (2017) [Nutrition and food systems. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome](#)).

Consumption is considered a crucial pillar of sustainable food systems. Food demand patterns are a result of food systems, but they can also be important levers for change. This doesn't mean that consumers are primarily responsible for their choices. The food system, in fact, determines choices and simply gives consumers a sense of freedom of choice.

Unlike the consumer choice model, the food environment approach recognizes that the choices we make about food, and their impact are significantly shaped by the context in which they are made. The approach recognizes that the most effective and equitable way to change food behavior is by changing the structural factors that determine food choices. In other words, the food environment approach prioritizes underlying causes over symptoms. In doing so, it does not deny individual agency, restrict choice, or “tell consumers what to eat,” but empowers people to exercise choice in line with the much-needed shift toward sustainable food systems (2021, [Food Environments & EU Food policy](#), p. 4). Furthermore, the food environment approach recognizes that multi-layered action with binding policies at all levels is needed to create a sustainable, enabling food environment, as food is a rights issue and therefore a public good.

Let it grow! – How learning questions guided our journey

When we developed our learning questions for this project, we had only a vague idea of what we were collectively aiming for. Of course, we all wanted to contribute to transforming the food system towards greater sustainability and justice. It was also clear that we wanted to put people at the centre of our approach and use supermarkets as pressure points within the system to bring about change.

We viewed the learning questions as clouds and the raindrops as the insights that we were gaining during the project. We did not know where the raindrops would fall or what they would bring, but we hoped they would water new seeds and grow new food for thought and action.

We formulated two main questions with some sub-questions:

1. How can the voices and choices of citizens be mobilized to effectively influence policy makers and retailers?
 - a. How can we use dialogue to build bridges between different stakeholders? And how best to facilitate this dialogue?
 - b. How to communicate and amplify the voices and choices to maximize impact and change narratives?
 - c. How to deal with voices and choices of communities in relation to our North Star?
2. How to diversify and unite movements to challenge the existing narratives on healthy, sustainable, affordable, accessible, and fair food at the local, national and EU levels and within EU North-south and East-West?

Each organization had its own specific learning questions, but these were linked to and contributed to the overarching learning questions. Those learning questions are reflected upon in the case described.

We hope some of these raindrops will be relevant to you and your valuable work to transform our food system. A food system transformation will not only change how and what we produce, process, distribute, and consume, but will impact almost every aspect of our lives and society. Food is the common denominator between health, the environment, climate, nature, spatial planning, poverty, infrastructure, cultures, social and economic structures, and it could fundamentally alter power relations.

Accessible, affordable, sustainable, just, and healthy food is a human right!
(and good for the planet and animals)

The Menu of Food Voices reading guide

In front of you lies the result of the lessons we have learned in a very short time. The Main dish is the chapter with our joint analysis and recommendations to policy makers at several levels, as well as to a few other stakeholder groups for whom it might be relevant. This joint analysis is based on the seven local practices as described in the Side dishes. Each of the seven organizations describes a case study, including a reflection on their local lessons learned, followed by recommendations based on these lessons. Our Dessert captures where we stand right now and how we see the way forward. We end with a Coffee as an example of a call to action based on our manifesto.

Main dish – Joint analysis and recommendations



Dinner in a community centre during inception workshop in The Hague. Source: Edit Tuboly.

Our main dish presents what we learned across the organisations and activities. This was the most valuable part of the project, understanding different approaches in our various countries, but always with the agreed-upon manifesto with principles and values in mind. We found commonalities throughout.

Key lessons

Across the various case studies, numerous key lessons emerged regarding transforming food systems and influencing policies. The following insights helped us to answer our learning questions.

1. Influencing policy makers and retailers

1a. Dialogue and facilitation

How can we use dialogue to build bridges between different stakeholders? And how best to facilitate this dialogue?

It is instrumental to build trust. Working with communities should always be based on respect and empowerment, also when bringing stakeholders together. Meetings should

be organized at a time that is suitable and in a way that is within the comfort zone of people. Being aware of power relations and how you are not just an actor in the system, but realizing that the system is also part of you, is crucial in how the relationship will evolve and for the success in working with communities.

Importance of local context and voices

Local communities are the crucial starting point for systemic change. Communities possess significant knowledge and passion for food and health. Understanding a community's specific needs, challenges, and preferences is essential to prevent external organizations from undermining or co-opting local initiatives. Community-based initiatives are highly motivated and therefore have a good chance of success if well-organized and supported. There are good reasons for distrust in existing food and political systems as demonstrated in our case studies. People within communities are the ones whose needs and preferences are often overshadowed by external agendas.

When it comes to specific target groups, such as youth or students, it is important to speak to their concerns to tailor interventions, such as education about food, creation of awareness about the food system or activism to improve the food environment. Listening to the voices of farmers and food producers are important too as they must operate in a system with unequal power relations. Some of our

recommendations that seem to be beneficial for the general good, could be regarded as harmful to the farmers. We must reformulate our demands from the negative (no to unhealthy food) to positive messages (more promotional offers on healthy food).

1b. Communicating and amplifying

How to communicate and amplify the voices and choices to maximize impact and change narratives?

Challenging dominant narratives

It is challenging to shift the prevailing narrative that “consumers just want cheap food”. However, authentic voices from communities, especially those facing food poverty, are powerful in demonstrating that recommended measures address real problems, not just elite concerns. Assumptions about low-income communities’ interest in healthy food, knowledge, or their dependence on external initiatives often proved to be incorrect.

Bridging the gap between the living experience and the system world is a challenge, and not easy to do. The language that is being used is very different and misunderstandings are common, leading to distrust. It is important to translate the experiences at the local level into local level policies. Connecting different local initiatives that provide good examples can help in advocacy at the national level and ultimately at the EU level.

There are many initiatives aiming to shift the dominant narratives about food, and these must be brought together into a broad, inclusive movement to make a lasting impact. We must make healthy food the new “normal”.

1c. Our North Star

How to deal with voices and choices of communities in relation to our North Star?

Healthy, more sustainable, plant-based diets with “less and better” animal source foods benefitting people’s health while bringing many co-benefits for the climate and environment, animal welfare, and food security. Improving the food environments for and with people as part of a transition towards a just, sustainable and healthy food system.

It is important to work with communities that are already striving for improvement of their food environment and are contributing to the transformation of the food system.

Views from communities residing in food deserts and food swamps are incredibly valuable, as they are experiencing the negative impact of our current food system daily and are pushed to the margins. They have a perspective that is not driven by the system but by the failures of the system.

2. Inclusive movement building

How to diversify and unite movements to challenge the existing narratives on healthy, sustainable, affordable, accessible, and fair food at the local, national and EU levels and within EU North-south and East-West?

When we, as a social organisation or alliance of organisations, face a struggle, whether specific or general, we are sometimes unaware that other organisations are also facing this struggle from different positions. We generally identify other actors as either favourable or unfavourable to our positions; however, in most cases there are intermediate positions: individuals or groups who are affected by the general problem but identify different causes or explore alternative ways of solving it. Working with a focus on listening, collaborating and seeking common ground with the latter group is essential to increase support and achieve the causes we defend.

The power of collaboration and multisectoral alliances

Connecting and diversifying movements around food issues through shared language, local stories, and emotions is effective. Collaborating with diverse stakeholders (e.g., consumers, health organizations, farmers, and environmental organizations) provides a more comprehensive understanding of issues and potential pitfalls. By genuinely engaging with a wide range of stakeholders, you can arrive at shared goals and joint actions that address the real, underlying systemic problem and not only symptoms.

Shifting Responsibility Upstream

It’s critical to avoid shifting major responsibilities onto vulnerable populations. The issues often stem from powerful agents like large food companies and inadequate government regulation, rather than individual consumer choices or small producers. The narrative needs to shift from individual responsibility to supporting collective power and demanding political action and regulation of key economic stakeholders.

The Systemic Nature of Food Issues

Food is not merely a niche topic, but a deeply political and legal issue connected to human rights, health, climate, economy, and social justice. A holistic approach that connects food to major problems like health, agriculture, finance, poverty, and climate is necessary for effective transformation.

Citizens are demanding change in the retail offer and practices at the local level

Food environments are determined by physical and economic access (as well as cultural factors). However, when asked, supermarkets are not necessarily the only solution identified by people. Alternative distribution models are also responding to the needs of populations (democratic supermarkets, mobile buses, etc...). If price remains the first choice-factor, various local case studies¹ have expressed the demand for access to food that is healthy, for transparency in prices, for fair conditions for the producers and a ban on unhealthy and unsustainable food advertising.

Supermarkets have the power to make changes locally

Evidence has been found that supermarket managers have power (depending on their branch's economic model) to implement changes within their store to facilitate access to healthy and sustainable food for their consumers.

Recommendations to policy makers and other stakeholders

In analyzing the lessons learned, we arrived at a number of recommendations applicable at various levels of government: local, national, and EU. In the introduction to each policy level, we've indicated the experiences on which the recommendations are based by listing the organizations in parentheses. You can view their case studies for more background information that led to the recommendations.

Local governments

Our experiences

“ Local authorities have an important role to play in the transformation of the food system because they have several levers to transform food systems, from school food to land use, to production systems and supply chains, and to citizen information. This is the level where alternative food initiatives are initiated and experimented with. Support from the local government is therefore crucial and they can be powerful allies to change national food policies. ”

“ Local governments need to recognize that communities, also those in disadvantaged areas, are often highly knowledgeable and passionate about food issues, contradicting dominant stereotypes. Their priorities may not align with conventional retail models like large supermarkets². ”

“ Community engagement requires flexibility, openness, and trust in the group. Local facilitators can be invaluable in understanding subcultures and the true meaning of their language. Failure to adhere to agreements can undermine trust and reinforce feelings of powerlessness among residents. It is important to be transparent and realistic about challenges that occur and share those challenges with the people you are engaging with. Don't trivialise or brush off concerns. Be honest³. ”

“ Municipal processes can be slow, and responsibilities unclear, requiring sustained pressure. Local authorities might perceive external advocacy organizations as threats, even when their goals align with community well-being. Building good relations at all levels is key⁴. ”

“ Local governments can learn from successful alternative food initiatives such as mobile greengrocers, community gardens, neighbourhood tables, etc. These show how access to healthy and affordable food can be improved while providing social benefits in disadvantaged neighbourhoods because they promote social cohesion and enable healthier and more sustainable choices. The multiple dimensions of food sustainability (social, economic, ecological, health, resilience, ethics) should be recognized.⁵ ”

1 Surveys undertaken through the work of Foodrise UK and Can France, citizen workshops facilitated by Foodrise EU and civil society organisations and local authorities within the ALTAA alliance.

2 See Foodrise EU, CECU

3 See CECU, Foodrise UK, Foodrise EU

4 See ALTAA, Foodrise EU

5 See Terra!, Foodrise UK, ALTAA, Foodrise EU

Recommendations to local governments

The above experiences lead to the following recommendations for local governments:

- **Directly engage with and empower communities:** Prioritize listening to and co-creating solutions with residents, recognizing them as experts in their own lived experiences. This helps in developing narratives and solutions that truly resonate with and address people's problems.
- **Directly engage with local food businesses:** whether alternative or mainstream, local food businesses shape food environments and therefore influence our capacity and desire to adopt healthy and sustainable diets. Engaging small and large retailers, restaurants and cafes in contributing towards a healthier and more sustainable local food system is crucial.
- **Support and fund alternative food initiatives:** Invest in and allocate more funding to the development of alternative food initiatives (e.g., community gardens, mobile greengrocers, democratic/social/people's supermarkets, solidarity purchasing groups) as these can be viable models that address issues like food deserts, provide economic opportunities, and foster social cohesion. Adjust requirements and conditions to subsidies to make them suitable for these initiatives.
- **Create enabling environments:** Work to dismantle myths about food choices and health in low-income areas. Show that choice is often limited in existing food environments and promote local policies that improve access (physical and economic) to affordable, healthy food options. Consider reduced business rates for healthy food businesses or allowing markets to take place within public spaces.
- **Integrate food into broader strategies:** Make food a cross-cutting issue within municipal planning, connecting it to climate deals, social services, economic development, and health strategies. Consider creating a food plan for your area, with a councillor or nominated person responsible for implementing and sharing it across departments.
- **Actively voice the need for ambitious national/international food policies** in various political/legislative fora and support the advocacy work of national campaigners

National Governments

Our experiences

“ While local governments play a key role in supporting and providing space for transformative food initiatives, they remain isolated in a hostile context if they are not recognized and supported at the national level. Strong national policies, regulation of the private sector and financial resources to stimulate viable food initiatives are essential to provide the scale and weight needed to embed them in society. ”

National governments must recognize and address the significant power imbalances within the food value chain. Dominant agro-industrial groups and large retailers can exploit trade negotiations and impose unfair conditions on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and farmers. Regulations are needed to balance these power inequalities and protect citizens, SMEs, farmers, and the environment.

Relying solely on market mechanisms (e.g., promotional offers) for healthy food can have unintended negative consequences for producers and may not address underlying issues of purchasing capacity or exploitative practices. It also fails to acknowledge that many citizens may live within areas without retail options⁶.

Isolated interventions are insufficient. A comprehensive government policy is essential to regulate the margins of food producers and retailers and increase the purchasing power of people living in poverty. Moreover, food is a human right, and the national government has the responsibility to guarantee this right.

Therefore, national governments should play a crucial role in promoting a shift towards a more ethical, sustainable, and safe food system that benefits everyone. This includes supporting the transition to plant-based diets and organic foods and procurement⁷.

⁶ See ALTAA

⁷ See Green REV Institute, Foodrise UK

Recommendations for national governments

- **Supporting local innovation:** Learning from and connecting successful local experiences can inform and strengthen national advocacy efforts. National policies should enable the development of sustainable alternative food models rather than solely focusing on the dominant supermarket system.
- **Implement comprehensive regulatory frameworks:** Introduce and enforce regulations for food producers and retailers to address issues such as unfair trade terms, margin controls, and the prevalence of unhealthy foods. This includes ensuring transparency in trade negotiations.
- **Prioritize food purchasing capacity:** Develop government policies that directly address food insecurity by increasing the purchasing power of low-income individuals and families, rather than focusing solely on supply-side interventions.
- **Support alternative food systems nationally:** Create a national policy framework that actively supports and facilitates the growth of alternative food networks across the country, recognizing their potential to deliver healthier, more sustainable diets and foster local economies. Support should include financial incentives and subsidies for these initiatives.
- **Foster education and awareness:** Shift the narrative from individual responsibility to collective action and political change. Support educational programs that provide reliable, unbiased information about food origin, impact on health, and the broader food system, targeting various demographics including youth.
- **Dismantle harmful narratives:** Actively work to dismantle myths that perpetuate misconceptions about food choices, health, and economic realities, ensuring that public discourse reflects the systemic nature of food issues.
- **Regulate advertising and marketing** for unhealthy food especially that targeted at children
- **Support plant-based diets:** Implement a policy to support the consumption and production of more plant-based foods, and the education of caterers and procurers about the nutritional aspects.

Cross-cutting recommendations for local and national governments

- **Embrace multi-stakeholder collaboration:** Actively seek out and engage with diverse organizations across sectors (charity, health, consumer, farmer, environmental, social economy) to gain a comprehensive understanding of challenges and co-create solutions.
- **Listen to and empower vulnerable populations:** Design policies and initiatives based on the real needs and lived experiences of people facing food poverty and insecurity, rather than making assumptions. Empower these groups to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes.
- **Recognize food as a public good:** Acknowledge food as a fundamental human right and a cross-cutting issue impacting health, environment, economy, and social justice. Develop policies that reflect this understanding, prioritizing public well-being over solely profit-driven models.
- **Promote transparency and access to information from a rights perspective:** ensure regulations for clearer information on food labels and their origin, so that consumers have access to reliable information and can make informed choices.
- **Invest in research and innovation:** Support research into viable alternative food models, sustainable business practices, and effective communication strategies that resonate with diverse communities.

EU level

Our experiences

If not embedded in EU level policy, national governments may not be willing to play an active role in ensuring that local initiatives and providing healthy food environments are supported with policy and finance. The many demands from society and the lobby of big food and feed companies and retailers compete with the willingness to see food as a human right and to invest in food environments. It is easier to leave it to the market mechanisms.

It is a common misapprehension that low-income or marginalized communities don't care about healthy or sustainable food. People care deeply – when they are given a voice. Food is connecting people and food is connected to almost all aspects of life. EU food narratives and policies must reflect lived realities, not rely on market-based or top-down assumptions.

Community-led initiatives succeed when they are trusted, resourced, and included in decision-making. EU frameworks should integrate participatory governance as a norm, not an exception.

Successful initiatives can inspire across countries and should be used to inform EU-wide support for alternative food networks and social innovation that can address the multiple crises caused by food systems that act beyond the planetary boundaries.

Many promising community food initiatives struggle with funding, logistics, or legal support. The EU heavily subsidizes agribusiness but not alternative, community-based food models. Supporting local food economies and cooperatives could contribute to meeting climate goals, encouraging rural development, and creating social equity.

Coalitions like Food Voices and many others, demonstrate the power of cross-border collaboration to shift narratives and influence policies. Such alliances foster shared tools, stories and advocacy – creating a European public voice for food justice.

Recommendations at the EU level

We have identified two types of recommendations at EU level. Those formulated at the systems level based on our manifesto and those that arise from experience, the living environment. Because there is some tension between these, we list them separately.

Recommendations based on the principles in our manifesto:

- **Food justice should be regarded as mainstream within EU policy.** Explicitly integrating social justice, health, equity, and environmental goals in the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP), into the many EU visions and plans and directives related to food and agriculture, environment and climate, and poverty reduction, innovations and in strengthening democratic structures and institutions.
- **Reverse the decisions made since 2022,** starting from the decision to withdraw the Sustainable Food Systems Law and “omnibus packages” that affect many food-related legislation, reporting and provisions.
- **Cohesion policy and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)** must explicitly support the transformation of food systems, thereby reinforcing both food and nutritional security. Involving the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee is essential to ensure that civil society and territorial partners have the space to co-shape food policy for sustainable systems. Dialogue must be multidimensional and continuous – through media, structured dialogue bodies, municipal-level consultations, and robustly financed through the EU's largest funding instruments. Rebuilding trust between EU institutions and the people should be a top political priority.
- **Development and adoption of a dedicated Plant Sector Action Plan** that should ensure the growth of the plant protein sector for human consumption, support demand-side policies, and guarantee access to healthy, plant-based food for every EU citizen as recommended by [European Civil Society Organisations](#).
- **Rebalance power in the food-system.** Strengthen EU regulation to limit supermarket and agribusiness dominance including stricter rules on unfair practices; transparency in pricing and contracts; support for fair trade and local supply chains.

Additional recommendations based on our cases

- **Fund and scale community-led food innovation** – To establish a dedicated EU Fund for Alternative Food systems that supports local markets, mobile grocers, community food hubs, and circular food economies. Provide capacity-building and mentorship grants to scale promising local models across borders.
- **Counter misinformation and shift food narratives** – Launch an EU-wide campaign to debunk myths about food choice, cost, and responsibility. Promote media projects to make food a public, political, and rights-based issue, not just a lifestyle choice. This must be accompanied by decisive action within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) – particularly addressing food promotion policy – including the explicit inclusion of plant-based alternatives in promotional strategies. We would advocate that measures are urgently needed to limit the advertisement and public promotion of meat and dairy products, which are currently heavily subsidised through CAP promotion funds.
- **Invest in youth engagement and education** – Fund programs that empower youth as food leaders, including participatory research; co-creation of food education curricula; youth forums on food and climate. It is essential that the European Climate Pact includes a dedicated pillar on food systems, which are currently significantly underrepresented. Food must no longer be treated as a marginal issue, but as a central driver of climate and societal change. Education is the foundation for building public awareness, citizen engagement, and political accountability⁸.
- **Support inclusive, cross-sector coalitions** – Encourage and co-finance multi-stakeholder food alliances at national and regional levels and mandate inclusive representation (farmers, youth, women, low-income groups, migrants, NGOs, etc.) in food policy consultations and programming.

Recommendations to other audiences

Retailers and supermarkets

- Reform promotional strategies: shift from promoting ultra-processed or unhealthy products to offering (retail provided) discounts on fresh, healthy, and sustainable foods, making this the new normal. The cost of this cannot be borne by the producers.

- Involve communities in designing offers that reflect real dietary needs and preferences, avoiding tokenism.
- Stop the retailers policy of “aesthetic perfection” in fruits and vegetables, instead increase the space to sell and promote second-grade produce, in order to reduce food loss and food waste, economic damage to farmers, and reduced food availability for consumers.

Community-based organizations and local NGOs

- Prioritize co-creation over consultation: Facilitate genuine, long-term partnerships with local communities, recognizing them as experts in their lived experience.
- Provide platforms for community members to lead campaigns, events, and decisions.

Schools and educational organizations

- Embed food justice in education: Move beyond nutrition to explore the social, political and environmental dimensions of food.
- Involve students in practical experiences (e.g. co-organizing food events, school gardens, community kitchens).

Funders and development agencies

- Fund alternative models and infrastructure: Support alternative food initiatives, and agroecological initiatives, as well as projects built from the bottom up in close consultation with the people concerned.
- Provide core funding and repair capital, not just project-based grants, to ensure stability and growth.
- Provide long-term funding for promising projects to allow to develop and have an impact
- Make sure that your conditions for funding are appropriate for the kind of projects that you want to support
- Support movement building, considering that time and trust is needed for true and strong collaboration

Media and storytellers

- Shift the narrative: Focus on everyday food justice stories, not just celebrity chefs or abstract debates
- Elevate community voices, including youth, rural residents, food workers, and marginalized consumers.

Researchers & Think Tanks

- Investigate power dynamics and system levers: Focus on how policies, corporate practices, and supply chains affect consumer choice, not just individual behaviour.

- Partner with communities in participatory action research and make sure that the process is transparent to communities.
- Explore the value of alternative food initiatives and how they can contribute to food system transformation, and what they need to be supported, taking into account the gap between living experiences and systems.

Side dishes – Seven case studies

Here they are, our side dishes! These are stories about our work contributing to food system transformation by mobilizing voices, and about our experiences that contributed to answering our learning questions.

Solidarity on the Plate – Green REV Institute, Poland

Green REV Institute positioned food as a *human rights and solidarity issue*, engaging youth, local decision makers and citizens through *Safe Food Days*, participatory storytelling, *Safe Food Magazine* and *Safe Food Portal*. Their innovation lies in giving young people leadership roles, proving that *ownership, relatability, and emotional connection* drive engagement more than technical advocacy.



Premiere of the movie “Is it just food?” in Katowice, Cinema Rialto. Source: Tomasz Makula.

Building Food Justice Together

Green REV Institute is a Polish think tank working at the intersection of human rights, animal rights, and climate justice. We see food as a deeply political issue that affects dignity, fairness, health, and climate. This vision inspired us to design a case focused on food justice and food solidarity, combining research, local action, and cross-sector collaboration.

With a strong and committed network, we set out to amplify voices often excluded from food debates, particularly young people and local communities. We aim to connect people across sectors, empower communities to see food as a question of rights and shared power, and move from

top-down education toward co-created, lived change. Our partners – from local governments to grassroots groups and local communities, teachers and students – brought expertise, commitment, and relationships that made this transition possible. Joining the Food Voices Coalition was a natural step to strengthen our advocacy and international activities. We wanted to explore new methods of mobilization, build cross-sector alliances, and influence the narrative around food as a political and legal issue. This experience strengthened our national and European advocacy, making it more authentic and grounded in the lived realities of communities. By integrating the voices of citizens directly into our work, we ensure that our message is not only policy-driven but also rooted in everyday experiences and collective power.

Framing our learning

These were our guiding questions:

1. How can we engage youth to influence decision-makers and retailers?
2. How can we connect and diversify movements around food issues?

Our actions

We took several concrete steps to turn food justice from a concept into a lived reality. Through the *Climate on the Plate* study, we conducted six focus group interviews with youth aged 15-18 in different Polish cities, exploring their views, habits, and motivations around food. The results showed a striking gap: young people rarely connect food with climate or justice, and their choices are shaped far more by price, taste, and marketing than by values or sustainability. This evidence confirmed our need to build new narratives rooted in daily realities. We also released the second issue of the [Safe Food Magazine](#), which brings together research findings and commentary from experts, activists, and scholars. The magazine serves as a key tool for raising awareness and strengthening our advocacy, creating a space where knowledge and lived experiences meet to inform public debate and policy.

We organized *Safe Food Days* in six cities, creating spaces where young people, community leaders, parents, teachers, and local authorities came together to discuss food solidarity, build relationships, and raise a collective voice for change. These events were co-created, with youth acting as moderators, interviewers, and advocates – showing that true ownership is a powerful driver of engagement.

Through subgrants awarded to among others rural women's circles and local groups, we enabled community-led food initiatives, building pride and agency. These projects fostered a strong, emotional local community around food and made systemic change feel possible.

We also produced the documentary *"Is it just food?"*, exposing the lack of transparency and misinformation surrounding food. By elevating real voices and lived experiences, the film empowers young people, local communities to challenge the dominant narratives and demand their right to truthful, accessible information about food and the access to healthy, sustainable food. The film is also a journey through local markets and farms, weaving

together conversations with farmers, expert insights, and the voices of consumers. It reveals how the agricultural sector and the food industry have distanced us from our relationship with food, while at the same time offering hope that, through community and solidarity, these connections can be rebuilt.

We also launched the [Safe Food Portal](#), an online hub providing accessible, reliable information about food safety, justice, and policy. The portal serves as a knowledge base for communities, decision-makers, youth, and educators, offering research, expert commentary, and practical tools to support advocacy and awareness-raising efforts around the right to safe and sustainable food.

At the same time, we pushed forward advocacy at local, national, and European levels, using opportunities to bring the language of food justice into institutional spaces – from consumer authorities to municipal debates. It was also a turbulent time at the EU level – with meetings with the DG AGRI cabinet, our complaint to the [European Ombudsman](#) regarding the European Commission's unfulfilled commitments on sustainable food systems, and the launch of the Food Solidarity Letter. The Food Voices Coalition gave us additional motivation to embrace an interdisciplinary approach to food and to consistently remind decision-makers of their unkept promises regarding the right to healthy food.

Our learnings

Our work highlighted that *ownership matters*. When young people design, moderate, and research activities themselves, they gain the confidence to speak up and influence power structures. *Relatability is key*: technical language about "food safety" or "sustainability" does not resonate. Instead, stories anchored in their own daily experiences and emotions spark engagement. *Shared action builds courage*: when young people advocate together, their demands cannot be ignored. However, *policy still feels distant*: many youths doubt their ability to create change, so we must build real opportunities for them to meet and challenge decision-makers directly.

To strengthen continuous dialogue and broaden outreach, we created the [Safe Food Magazine](#). The magazine gives space to diverse voices – from youth and local leaders to scientists and activists – and highlights stories, facts, and research that connect food justice to everyday experiences. It is both a communication tool and a platform for building a stronger community around the idea of safe and just food.



Climate on the plate: students from Liceum Sowizdrzala, Katowice, explore their views and habits on food. Source: Olga Jachimek.

We have been asking ourselves – how can we engage youth to influence decision-makers and retailers?

The project implementation provided the answer – by listening, co-creating, and recognizing them as experts in everyday life. As part of the project, we involved youth in co-creating Safe Food Days – local events combining education and social action. Young people from various backgrounds – students, scouts, young leaders from small towns – were involved in organizing these events. They led interviews, surveys, and debates, and moderated discussions. One result of these efforts is the documentary *What We Know About Food*.

How might we connect and diversify movements around food issues?

Through a shared language, local stories, relationships, and emotional community rather than strategies based on abstractions. Thanks to events like Food Safety Days in six cities – Warsaw, Lublin, Katowice, Gdańsk, Białystok,

and Łódź – we integrated youth, older adults, local organization representatives, and groups that had rarely collaborated around food and food justice. Joint activities – from cooking and discussions to writing postcards and advocacy campaigns – created a new quality of cooperation and gave the topic of food a communal dimension. We must constantly empower people within the food system by engaging them, listening, enabling confrontation, and building a front for the right to healthy, just food. We saw the power of cross-sector alliances. Connecting climate, education, health, social justice, and consumer protection communities made conversations richer and more inclusive. Engaging so-called “non-obvious” allies – teachers, parents, local NGOs, scouts, local authorities – added credibility and practical wisdom. And giving out community subgrants created not just projects, but networks, belonging, and a sense of pride. Framing food through dignity, fairness, and rights rather than dry, technical measures opened the conversation to more diverse voices and deeper solidarity.

How did we succeed?

This program succeeded because we built local ownership and trust, invested in strong cross-sector alliances, gave youth space to lead, and provided resources to empower local actors. Creative tools like the documentary, participatory events, and storytelling helped bridge divides. Shifting away from jargon toward accessible, everyday language also proved critical, as did aligning our advocacy with policy opportunities to move beyond talk and toward structural change.

Where Can We Grow?

We see room for improvement. Sub-granted groups would benefit from deeper mentoring and capacity-building support to sustain their projects over time. The legal and policy messaging should be able to better reach marginalized audiences including youth, who rarely connect their daily food choices to rights or politics. As a movement we could also act more quickly to seize policy windows and regulatory opportunities, ensuring the right to safe and just food is truly protected. Finally, we need to keep moving away from narratives of individual responsibility, shifting instead toward collective, systemic solutions.

Recommendations for policymakers

Policy frameworks should integrate food as a human and animal rights question, a matter of climate responsibility, and an issue of social justice. Local leadership and grassroots initiatives deserve stronger support through funding, mentoring, and capacity building. We also call for food, health and climate education in schools, with content that resonates with young people's daily realities. Regulations should guarantee transparency and the right to information on food origin, production methods, and impacts. Finally, meaningful youth, local communities' participation in food policy must be prioritized through advisory councils, citizen assemblies, or participatory budgeting.

Recommendations for organizations designing similar projects

Co-create programs with communities rather than delivering them top-down. Work across sectors to build a shared language of change. Focus on local stories and personal experiences to spark emotional connection. Beyond small grants, invest in long-term leadership, skills, and networks to sustain grassroots energy. Adapt your messaging to the language and emotions of youth – avoid technical jargon and moralizing tones. Build narratives around shared responsibility and solidarity, showing that food system change is a collective task. And strategically align your advocacy with relevant policy processes to maximize impact.

Local action on retail – ALTAA (France)

ALTAA developed the tool “My Responsible Supermarket” to map 16 areas of retail activity which can be influenced and shaped at the local level. Their approach is unique in showing that *supermarkets’ practices can be shifted locally* and calls on dialogue and cooperation between store managers and local food practitioners creating proof of concept for stronger national and EU regulation.



Increasing the share of sustainable and organic food in local supermarkets, promoting local organic products.

Source: Interbio Occitanie.

Supporting healthy, just and sustainable food for all in local supermarkets

The ALTAA alliance in France brings together over 110 allies gathered around a common ambition to accelerate food and farming transitions and approximately 700 individuals and organisations are involved in the alliance’s activities. ALTAA’s aim is to support the diverse and ambitious activities of these allies and partners. It facilitates this by being:

- A space for discussion, cooperation and action between civil society organisations (CSOs), local authorities, research institutions, businesses, NGOs and community organisations etc to strengthen our skills and actions by way of a systems approach to food.
- A force for joint advocacy to amplify the impact of local food stakeholders, shift dominant narratives and participate in reshaping local; national and EU policies, ALTAA feeds into and channels the advocacy work of allies and partners.

ALTAA’s framework of action since its launch in September 2022 is around shifting food environments at the local level to facilitate the adoption of more sustainable and plant-based diets.

In the process of collectively identifying local action levers to change food environments, the role of retailers has appeared as a strategic yet largely under-explored area where little knowledge exists and little action has been taken.

ALTAA contributed to the set up of the Food Voices Coalition to work with partners willing to explore this subject collectively, identify good practice outside of France, and contribute to a multi-scale programme with local, national and international perspectives. Our learning questions were:

1. How can we identify local action levers to shift the offer and practices of the retail sector?
2. How will retailers be willing to engage on the issue of their ‘territorial responsibility’ with local stakeholders?
3. How can we identify and voice a local demand for national/international regulation of retail practices, aiming at a level playing-field that promotes healthy and sustainable food?

Context

ALTAA coordinated a strategic focus over the course of a year and a half (between March 2024 and September 2025) to tap into the collective intelligence of the alliance in order to identify action levers at the local level to shift supermarkets' offer and practices. This work included:

- A [working group of 4 pilot projects](#) to deep dive and learn from the experience of those experimenting with local action on retail.
- Interviews with 29 experts and supermarket directors and senior staff.
- 3 online and in person public workshops ([online workshop January 2025](#) – 111 participants; [workshop at the ALTAA National Conference Sept 2024](#) – Paris, 70 participants; [workshop at the National conference on agroecological transition and sustainable food Dec 2024](#) – Montpellier 30 participants).
- Convening an informal working group of 29 frontrunners amongst local organisations.
- Contributing to [national advocacy](#) in partnership with CAN France ([contribution to CAN's report on retailers pp96-97](#)).
- [Mapping of inspiring initiatives](#).
- [Prototype tool "My Responsible Supermarket"](#) to analyse the practices and offer of a supermarket.

The first aim of this strategic focus was to measure the appetite for challenging the practices of the dominant mass-retail model amongst local organisations involved across France in the ALTAA alliance including local authorities, civil-society organisations, businesses and researchers. Thus reinforcing, from the bottom-up, other national and international advocacy efforts.

The second aim was to explore and identify effective action levers to deploy in-store or out-of-store in a local area to shift the offer and practices of supermarkets.

Description

The cornerstones of ALTAA's strategic focus on retail have been the facilitation of the working group of pilot projects; and the series of 29 interviews with experts, supermarket directors and senior staff.

A working group of four pilot projects

The four pilot projects were recruited on the basis of ongoing actions to open dialogue and work with retailers in their local area to improve their offer and practices. The four pilot projects are :

- **Interbio Occitanie** : Promoting the presence, visibility and consumption of organic products in supermarkets;
- **Department of Seine Saint Denis** : Promoting affordable access to healthy and sustainable food products and strengthening national advocacy for a social security for food;
- **Grenoble Alpes Metropole** : Involving supermarkets in addressing local food and farming transition issues beyond the sale of local products;
- **Club Drômois de l Alimentation** : Increasing the sale of local and sustainable products in supermarkets, creating lasting relationships with retailers.

One-to-one interviews were conducted as well as 2 collective in-person workshops in Lyon.

We expected to gain practical knowledge on what actions are currently within the hands of supermarkets and what that good practice could look like, combined with insights gained from the other activities undertaken in this strategic focus,

A prototype tool "My Responsible Supermarket" and the mapping of good practice

This resulted in the development of a [prototype for a tool "My Responsible Supermarket"](#) whose aim is to :

- Facilitate dialogue between local supermarkets and local food stakeholders;
- Understand the impact (+/-) of supermarkets on food environments;
- Facilitate/encourage action by highlighting action levers for supermarkets and local food stakeholders.

We identified 16 areas of supermarket activity that shape our food environments as target areas for local action on retail:

1. Promotions.
2. Social measures (food vouchers, etc.).
3. Margins.
4. Physical accessibility.
5. Use of space.
6. Links with other shops and strategy for differentiation.
7. Sourcing.
8. Shelf display.
9. Contractualisation with local farmers.
10. Sustainable local supply chains.
11. Marketing /Point-of-sale advertising (POS).
12. In-store events.
13. Stock management.
14. Management of unsold goods.
15. Packaging.
16. Container deposit scheme.

Each of these areas has a rating scale of 0 to 3 to understand current practice and the potential for improvement.

Related to these 16 areas, **50 action levers have been identified that can be implemented by supermarket managers and staff** and over **40 action levers that can be implemented by other local stakeholders** (the local authority, civil society organisations, other food businesses...). These action levers are illustrated, where possible, by a [mapping of inspiring initiatives](#).

Our research has not revealed a great number of existing inspiring initiatives within retail, but we will continue to collate these.

The next steps in developing this tool are: to test it and improve the user-experience; and to provide a complementary methodology guide with a 'getting to know each other' section including factsheets on the main French supermarket chains.

This work is an initial step towards mobilising local action to improve the offer and practices of retailers. It has led to setting the first blocks of an argument-base around the "territorial responsibility" of supermarkets, in order to frame these new relationships between local authorities, civil society organisations and supermarkets and provide practical solutions to act.

Lessons

The various activities undertaken in this strategic focus on retail have confirmed for us the relevance of working on the issue of retail at the local level and has opened up possibilities for wider and deeper mobilisation within the ALTAA alliance on this subject and in coordination with national partners. A range of questions remain unanswered, but we can already share some lessons learned.

How can we identify local action levers to shift the offer and practices of the retail sector ?

At the beginning of this project, the question as to whether we would be able to identify any action levers at the local level to shift the offer and practices of retailers – or whether action was concentrated exclusively at the national/international levels – remained open. To this we can add the supposition widely shared by local authorities and civil-society organisations that they are not legitimate or equipped to engage in dialogue with retailers and that change can only come from national/international level.

The project has provided a very clear answer. We delved into the minute details of supermarket activity which enabled us to identify 16 areas that could be influenced locally by the store manager and by other local stakeholders (the local authority, civil society organisations, other food businesses...) along with close to 90 very operational action levers. The breadth of action in the hands of the store-manager depends of course on the type of supermarket (integrated, franchised etc) which we have taken into account in our work. This also results in a general sense of empowerment for local food stakeholders to engage work with retailers. In this sense, we have identified 4 types of action :

1. Engage in dialogue and cooperation.
2. Establish economic partnerships.
3. Regulate and legislate locally.
4. Strengthen citizen mobilisation and engagement.

How will retailers be willing to engage on the issue of their 'territorial responsibility' with local stakeholders?

Feedback shows that the personality of the store manager and aisle managers is crucial in developing successful relationships. By collaborating with the front-runners, our work suggests that it is likely to create a snow-ball effect on the other managers, who are very reactive to the strategies of their competitors.

However, it has not been easy to get into contact with retailers. 10 interviews were conducted with supermarket directors and senior staff out of 40 requests sent.

Learnings from the pilot projects show that building personal relationships between a supermarket manager and its local ecosystem (local authority, producers, local businesses, civil society organisations) creates deeper collaborations and expectations which tend to curb exploitative and aggressive commercial practices. In other words, if you are embedded in your local ecosystem, you have a vested interest in maintaining good relationships with them.

We have identified 2 crucial steps in engaging retailers on their "territorial responsibility" : one is to bridge the knowledge gap between the store-managers and the local food transition ecosystem (in particular the workings of local food partnerships or food policy councils) which are very complex entities, difficult to comprehend by a store-manager who works on a shorter-term basis. The other is to shed light on the workings of a supermarket for the local food stakeholders to help them formulate legitimate demands for healthy and sustainable food and have a stronger argument-base to engage in dialogue.

More needs to be done to confront supermarket managers with the needs of the population in the areas where they are based in terms of provision of healthy, affordable, sustainable food. This can then challenge the narrative that the supermarket offer is simply responding to the demands of their customers. Here, CAN France is strongly contributing to raising awareness and raising the voices and demands of the population. We can also learn from the work of our partner Foodrise UK in the research undertaken in Knowlsley.

A number of benefits resulting from a store-manager's local engagement have been identified :

- Better knowledge of the demands and trends within the local population relating to food.
- Better anticipation of changes in the market due to a greater proximity and understanding of the local food and farming policy agenda and strategies.
- Easier sourcing of local products.
- Contribution to the development of innovative local logistical platforms to enable larger volumes of sustainable local products to be distributed.

How can we identify and voice a local ask for national/international regulation of retail practices, aiming at a level playing-field that promotes healthy and sustainable food?

By trialing local in-store experimentations of healthier and more sustainable offers and practices of supermarkets, local stakeholders are working towards a proof-of-concept that legitimates the demands for national/international regulation of retail practices. Of course more work needs to be done to make the business case, but the mounting pressure is already having some impact as is shown by the recent joint declaration of 5 French retailers asking for government regulation and a level playing field on a number of issues.

Discussions within the working groups have clearly shown that local stakeholders are, at this stage, more inclined to trial a collaborative approach to engaging with supermarkets rather than a confrontational one. This collaborative approach has been our chosen strategy to develop the tool. However, the more confrontational work being undertaken by campaigners at the national level is complementary and is largely used by local stakeholders to build their case locally.

In the future, we hope that the more the issue of retail gets onto the agenda locally in local food partnerships/ local food policy councils etc the more it will become visible to senior politicians and open the way for regulation at national/international level.

Recommendations

Recommendations for local stakeholders (local authorities, civil society organisations, food businesses...)

- Engage in dialogue with retailers, build personal relationships and bridge the knowledge gap.
- Bring to light the impacts of current supermarket practices locally on health, the environment, and the economy.
- Voice the demands and expectations of the local population in terms of food to compare with the current offer
- Support in-store experimentations towards healthier and more sustainable offer and practices by supermarkets.
- Trial out-of-store action levers within the hands of local stakeholders (eg : Organise citizens' debates and workshops to formulate demands to retailers, Establish local Healthy and Sustainable Food Charters and encourage retailers to sign up to them; Establish local calls for projects, competitions, labels and awards for distributors to encourage them to improve their practices etc).
- Multiply the number of engagements with local supermarkets to create a mass action via the store-managers bringing these demands to the attention of the regional and national collaborators.

- Actively voice the need for national/international regulation of retail in various political/legislative fora and support the advocacy work of national campaigners.
- Support the multiplication of alternative retail models in the local area (cooperative supermarkets, buying groups etc), in order to encourage supermarkets to review their offer and practices to remain competitive.

Recommendations to national NGOs

- Join forces with local authorities and CSOs to trial changes within supermarkets and develop proofs of concept to build the business-case for healthy and sustainable retail practices.
- Push for and support a sectorial move from retailers, in the form of a pre-competitive common action towards more healthy and sustainable food.

Recommendations to policymakers

- Regulate the retail sector so as to set a level-playing field in particular relating to transparency on prices, promotions, marketing, the share of healthy, sustainable and more plant-based food on offer.
- Regulate advertising and marketing more widely.
- Adopt a plan to support the consumption and production of more plant-based foods.

Easy Access Is Key – Foodrise UK (United Kingdom)

Foodrise UK explored alternative food networks in deprived areas of Liverpool/Knowsley, focusing on the *Queen of Greens mobile greengrocer* as an example. Research interviews revealed that residents often prefer *community-led shops and pantries over supermarkets*, challenging assumptions about consumer choice and showing the limits of food aid.



Paul Flannery, greengrocer at the Queen of Greens mobile bus. Source: Lucy Antal.

Transforming the food system for climate, nature and justice

We take bold action to uncover the root causes of injustice in our food system and expose how corporate power exploits people and the planet — while building truly just and resilient alternatives from the ground-up.

We speak truth to power. We take risks. We act where and when others won't.

From launching legal action and producing hard-hitting research to working directly with local communities, we drive systemic change across food and farming — powered by grassroots energy and backed by the facts.

We exist to say what others won't, do what others don't, and never settle for "it can't be done". Change is possible — and we are rising to make it happen.

We wanted to take join the Food Voices Coalition alongside our colleagues in Europe because the project very much aligns with our goals:

- The right to good food will be enacted
- Just supply chains and agroecology will prevail
- Food economies will be fair

Our Learning Questions

1. How well are supermarkets meeting the priorities of communities in Liverpool and Knowsley?
2. How can Feedback UK engage with community priorities and turn them into a campaign?
3. How can existing food system issues, including the cost-of-living-crisis, and the interest in 'better' options coexist or work together?

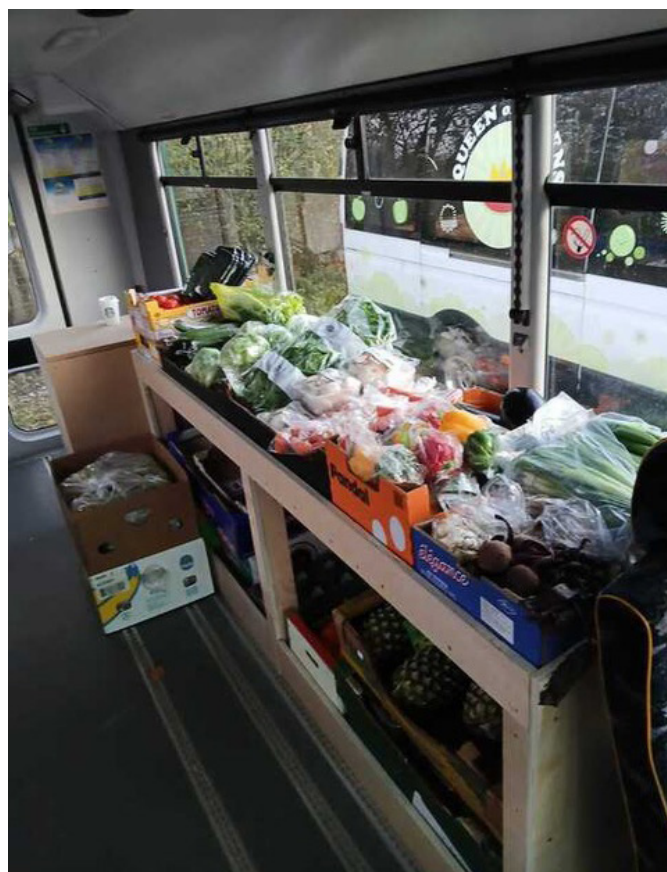
Context

Team North from Foodrise work in the North West of England, primarily Liverpool City Region or as it is also known, Merseyside. We work in Knowsley and Liverpool, currently 2nd and 3rd in the indices of deprivation for England.

Our Approach

Who are supermarkets for? A deep dive with residents in an area that is very under-served for fresh, affordable food. Building upon our local knowledge and connections with the communities within Stockbridge Village, our learning questions were designed to reflect the lack of autonomy and choice that consumers in this area face. They live in rental accommodation, face reduced public transport options, and have limited fresh food access. Employment, health and education indices all reveal low attainment and inequalities, which impact on confidence and people's expectations of what their living environment should or could be.

Does access make a difference? An assessment of the Queen of Greens mobile greengrocer as an alternative retail model within Liverpool, and whether it improves access to fruits and vegetables in an area of high deprivation in the UK. The inability to access fresh fruits and vegetables is a growing public health concern, disproportionately affecting under-resourced communities. Poor nutrition in these communities leads to diet-related health outcomes such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, and hypertension. A significant contributing factor is the physical environment, including the lack of stores providing healthful foods



Queen of Greens interior. Source: Lucy Antal.

Description of activity

1. We started out with a basic survey, handed out to residents of Stockbridge Village in Knowsley. Results from completed surveys revealed that for 88%, the cost of food is the most important factor, followed by 64% citing quality.
2. We followed this up with a more in-depth workshop attended by residents who were users of the food aid support in Stockbridge. What we discovered from our discussions is that supermarkets are not seen as the answer and many of our respondents were cynical or wary of supermarket "green/ value washing", particularly with relation to their donations of surplus food to [food aid redistributors](#).

Most of our interviewees expressed a clear preference for the establishment of neighbourhood or community shops based on the pantry model. This is quite exciting and dovetails in with another piece of research being undertaken by the UK team – asking food pantries and food banks to reveal the true extent of the usefulness (or not) of surplus food donations received weekly from retailers.

Some of the questions and answers:

Do you struggle to access (find) any specific foods within your local area?

"...it lacks things like vegan or plant based or vegetarian stuff"

Do you feel you have a voice over what food is available to you?

"...the way they say through customer demand, I'd like to see where they get that from. I mean I've got a club card and I was just mentioning about the Tesco club card. None of them send an email saying would you like to answer this survey or what can we do better and things like that?"

"I used to be a vegetarian, but since the kids came, I can't afford to be one. I'm reliant on what I get in the food bank or pantry, and there's not much fresh produce or vegetarian options."

3. An ethnography of the Queen of Greens mobile greengrocer service sought to answer the following question: How does The Queen of Greens, a mobile produce market, improve access to fruits and vegetables in an area of high deprivation in the UK?

The goal of this research is to strengthen the case for a national policy framework which supports the proliferation of alternative food networks in the UK, by outlining the positive potential of alternative food networks to solve problems which are commonplace in the current supermarket-dominated model. Alternative Food Networks are broadly understood to be *'food provisioning which in a general sense are different from the mainstream food system'*, and distinct from the UK's supermarket supply chains. This forms part of a larger programme of work on destructive diets, designed to hold supermarkets to account for their lack of progress on healthy and sustainable diets.

[The Queen of Greens](#), launched in November 2022, is a social-enterprise mobile greengrocer service run with the support of the City of Liverpool's food alliance, Feeding Liverpool. The service aims to improve access to fruit and vegetables for residents across Liverpool by bringing fresh, affordable produce to areas identified as food deserts and communities affected by food insecurity.

Through analysis of field notes and conversations held on the bus, four major themes emerged: Customer Satisfaction, Accessibility, Affordability & Challenges.

Customer Satisfaction and Quality

Customers often spoke about their satisfaction with the service with two subthemes emerging: Personalised customer service and quality.

The importance of friendly service is further reflected in the survey, where 50% of customers specifically mention 'friendly service' when asked 'what aspects of the service do you like'. This highlights the fact that customer service is a key factor influencing customers' shopping experience and loyalty. Out of the surveyed customers, 86% agreed or strongly agreed that shopping at the Queen of Greens increases the variety of fruit and vegetables eaten by the household whilst 67% agreed or strongly agreed that the service encourages them to try new foods.

Many customers commented on the quality of the produce, particularly its freshness. The produce for the Queen of Greens is purchased daily, unlike supermarket produce, which may sit for a week before being sold, resulting in diminished flavour and shorter shelf life.

Accessibility

Health & Lifestyle Choices

Customers spoke about how the Queen of Greens encourages healthier food choices, particularly for themselves and their families. The bus also creates opportunities for children to explore and embrace healthy eating habits. At Everton Children's Centre, teachers brought groups of children onto the bus to actively involve children in learning, reinforcing education around healthy food choices.

Convenience & location

One elderly lady from shared accommodation appreciates the service for its proximity and the ability to buy only what she needs, unlike supermarkets that sell in multipacks. After shopping, she chatted with two other customers, highlighting how the bus serves as a social hub, offering opportunities for community interaction and building social connections.

Vouchers

The use of vouchers, mainly the Alexandra Rose and Healthy Start vouchers, was spoken about frequently with a significant number of customers relying on Alexandra Rose vouchers. At the time of the survey, 427 families were registered for Alexandra Rose, benefiting 357 children

between the ages of 0-5 years. Vouchers act as a critical tool for addressing food insecurity, particularly for ensuring that families with young children have access to affordable nutritious food.

Affordability

Multiple customers commented on how the produce is 'affordable' and 'cheap'. 86% of customers agree or strongly agree that the Queen of Greens saved their household money on the weekly food shop. To promote inclusivity the Queen of Greens uses a diverse range of income streams including cash, card, NHS Healthy Start cards or Alexandra Rose vouchers. This ensures customers can access fresh fruit and vegetables regardless of their personal circumstances.

Challenges

Logistical challenges – Customer variability, and stock

Service stops can be unpredictable; they can be very busy one week and quieter the next. This highlights the significant logistical challenge of mobile produce markets and the importance of strategic planning to ensure the bus is well stocked to meet demand whilst illustrating the need to adapt to fluctuating demand and the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in service operations to maximise sales and customer satisfaction.

Fundraising – Capital

Fundraising and cash flow is another significant challenge for the service and likely mobile greengrocers in general. Applying and receiving funding for capital such as repairs or for a new bus is uncommon and hard to come by. This makes it very challenging when something does go wrong. When applying for funding for mobile produce markets (MPMs) it could be beneficial to include a budget for repairs within the initial grant to safeguard the services' continuity.

Insights

The research aimed to explore the Queen of Greens service and the use of MPMs as an intervention to improve access to fruits and vegetables in the UK. This study provides valuable insights into the acceptability and effectiveness of MPMs, highlighting the benefits and challenges of the service and their impact on community members' lives.

Lessons

How well are supermarkets meeting the priorities of communities in Liverpool and Knowsley?

They are not. The existence of food deserts within Liverpool and Knowsley is highlighted by our research, both with the residents of Stockbridge Village and the people who access the Queen of Greens service. There are some supermarkets in Knowsley, but they have followed the model of a large multipurpose hypermarket, so are limited to specific areas. In neighbourhoods such as Stockbridge Village, there is a Nisa Local (franchised by the Co-op), but a cost analysis has revealed that prices for some basic products are higher in this low-income neighbourhood shop than a more upmarket perceived as "luxury" supermarket such as Waitrose. Communities are less wedded to the idea of a supermarket than might have been thought.

How can Foodrise UK engage with community priorities and turn them into a campaign?

An example of this has been the Used By report – which took comments from the community regarding the prevalence of inedible or unhelpful food surplus being dumped on food aid support groups. We will be using the research and study from the Food Voices Coalition work to populate our report "[Purpose Over Profit](#): How alternative food networks can make the Food Strategy succeed", exploring the potential of alternative food networks to offer healthier, more sustainable diets in the UK than the current-supermarket-dominated system and offering a suite of policy recommendations for both local and national government.

How can existing food system issues, including the cost-of-living-crisis, and the interest in 'better' options coexist or work together?

Understanding that choice is often not present despite people's preference for a "better" or more "ecological" food accessibility is a story that is not told enough. Assumptions are made by those with more power and privilege over the reasons why people "make" a choice over what food they consume. It is no choice at all. The cost-of-living crisis highlighted this with the explosion of food aid support across Britain. Over 3.1 million emergency food parcels were distributed by food banks in the 12 months leading up to March 2024, marking a record high in need. This represents a 94% increase over the past five years, concurrent with the pandemic and living costs increases. These food parcels are compiled using a mix of

donated and bought food items, removing any choice from the eventual recipient. Moving away from the (inaccurate) win-win narrative of food surplus donations solving food insecurity is a crucial first step for policy makers and the larger food aid distributors to recognise.

Recommendations

1. Ignore the spin put on food access and availability that is championed by the supermarkets. A more human, social experience is preferred. Being able to choose quantity and have options of where to shop for food rather than a one stop shop that is designed for the retailer to make profit, not the convenience of the customer.
2. As other Food Voice Coalition members have commented, engaging with citizens is not a quick process. It is important to show up, to be involved, to be invited. Build more time and capacity into the initial meetings and discussions. Building trust through word of mouth within a community is still a key tenet.
3. We need another way to tackle food insecurity and access to fresh, affordable and healthy food options in our neighbourhoods. Food aid has failed; it perpetuates the problem of inadequate nutrition and only offers a temporary fix. Policy makers must be bolder and willing to invest in longer term, more experimental options. The Queen of Greens bus is not complicated, but it relied on donations to set it up and to purchase the vehicle. The success of reaching 750 households a week with access to fresh produce could be replicated and scaled.
4. The process of creating the Food Voices Coalition was supported by Healthy Food Healthy Planet, but investment is needed to continue the learning and sharing. Bringing together 7 different organisations across Europe was a big task, and in particular, the option of meeting in person was crucial to build cohesion and agreement.

Our Food, Our Choice – Foodrise EU (Netherlands)

Foodrise EU supported residents of The Hague's Moerwijk district in developing a “democratic supermarket” – a retail model linking food access with community, social, and economic empowerment. Their approach disproves the stereotype that low-income groups only care about price, showing instead that food can be a starting point for inclusion, health, and dignity.

Food as a starting point for inclusion, health and dignity

Foodrise in the EU, formerly known as Feedback EU, is an NGO based in the Netherlands and linked to Foodrise in the UK. Foodrise EU was founded in 2022 and has coordinated the [Food Voices Coalition](#) since 2024. It aims to transform the food system for climate, nature, and justice by conducting research and publishing reports, by campaigns and advocacy work at local, national, and European levels.

We joined the [Food Voices Coalition](#) to strengthen our efforts to improve food environments by listening to citizens' voices, and through learning from the experiences of other organisations in Europe on how to connect these voices with policymaking processes at all levels of government. As a platform, it amplifies the voices of citizens across Europe, so that our food can truly be our choice.

At the start of our project with the Food Voices Coalition, we formulated these learning questions:

1. How do we deal with local voices that are not interested in food transition or a healthy, just food environment?
2. How do we facilitate dialogue with communities and bring these voices to the national level?
3. How can we effectively influence retailers and policy makers to take up the citizen priorities for a healthy, just, affordable, and sustainable food supply at the local and national level?

It matters where you live

Moerwijk is a multicultural neighbourhood in The Hague, the Netherlands, with around 150 different nationalities living there and a neighbourhood where life and health expectancy is extremely low (respectively seven years and fifteen years shorter than average in The Netherlands). This is not a coincidence, but the result of structural mechanisms of inequality. In this area, [28% of the population](#) lives at or below the minimum income level, while the average in the Netherlands is 7%.



Presentation of the report on a democratic supermarket in Moerwijk. Source: Edit Tuboly.

Many poverty reduction programs and well-intentioned interventions are attempted in this area, but there is still high unemployment, drug trafficking and money laundering. In Moerwijk, supermarkets are too far away and the alternatives consist of pizzerias and shops selling drinks and snacks. After ten years of talk about the need to improve the food environment in this area in The Hague, a resident took the initiative to create a petition in April 2024. Interestingly, the petition does not call for a regular supermarket, but for one that is connected to social and economic issues to the availability of healthy food. Foodrise EU got in touch with this community through a local network of alternative food initiatives ([Ons Eten](#)).

Our food: we want choice!

In April 2024, a group of residents in this low-income area in The Hague asked in this petition for a supermarket in their neighbourhood that will not only provide them with healthy, fresh and affordable food, but also with economic opportunities for the young people around and that would serve as a social meeting place. We started to call this the 'democratic' or 'social' supermarket.

Using our connection with a local level network of food alternatives (Ons Eten), Foodrise EU conducted research on what people in the area really want in relation to food and their food environment. For Foodrise EU it was a pilot project to gain experience in collaborating with local people to improve food environments from the bottom-up.

In collaboration with the community centre where the petition originated, we organised a meeting to share the research results and to further develop the idea for this supermarket. The participation of approximately twenty-five people was dynamic and enthusiastic. Besides demonstrating a great passion and knowledge about nutrition and its relationship to health and the economic and social circumstances in which they live, there was also a clear distrust of the food and political systems. Our [research findings](#) were fully confirmed by the group.

The [second part of the event](#) was a workshop session, where participants worked in two groups on what they want this supermarket to look like, the kind of products it should offer, how it would function, how it would contribute to improving their living environment and what they could do themselves and who could help them achieve their goals. Their concept of a democratic supermarket began to take shape.

We made [a video](#) on the spot. Some stereotypes popped up, but if we delved beneath the surface, we began to understand why people were acting the way they do. It especially showed how much access to healthy food mattered to them. The press we invited to the end of the event published a whole page in the Saturday edition of a [national newspaper](#) with stories of the residents at the centre. We produced blogs and social media posts and shared the video online to stimulate discussion. We intended to use the video in a campaign of a national network on alternative food initiatives, but a lack of funding prevented this.

Although invited, no one from the municipality attended the meeting, and the residents asked us to organize another meeting, this time in the evening. However, shortly after this meeting, the petition initiator was invited to speak at

the municipal council committee, where the supermarket issue was discussed. The local network Ons Eten and Foodrise EU also spoke out in support of the residents. We arranged a van for them so they could attend the council debate about their neighbourhood.

We organized a small working group consisting of the petition initiator, a transformation manager of the city of The Hague, someone from Ons Eten and Foodrise EU. We met a few times to discuss what strategy to follow and to get updates. The initiator had several talks with the transformation manager and supermarket owners and the housing companies.

Although it was a challenge to reach the transformation manager, he played a positive role in bringing together commercial parties and the initiator. He was also involved in commissioning a study into the technical feasibility of a supermarket in the area. Some of the bottlenecks were: the available physical space is too small for a regular supermarket; there is no parking space near the supermarket; risks and fears associated with competition from a larger supermarket a mile away; and sustainability concerns due to the socioeconomic situation in the area. This area also has a reputation for illegal trade and money laundering, making it an unfavourable environment.

In November we organized a [Round Table at the Plant the Future dinner](#) of the Dutch Transition Coalition on Food. We invited to our table a resident, a scientist, a short chain service provider, a supermarket owner, someone from the municipality and someone from the local food network. The representative of a major supermarket chain failed to show up. We discussed how we could accelerate the transition to healthy, just, and affordable food in the neighbourhood. We decided to explore what could be a good business model for the supermarket.

The city of The Hague presented a new version of their Food Policy at the end of January 2025. In this document, support for the democratic supermarket was pledged under the condition that it would be physically realistic. Together with Ons Eten and the Food Policy Council the Hague, we have also succeeded in making food part of [local climate deals](#). In this context, we commissioned research to explore whether behavioural changes occur when people participate in activities in places where they can "connect with food," such as community tables, preparing meals together, gardening in the neighbourhood, or buying food from local and regional farmers. The results will be presented during the Climate Week to local governments to advocate for more physical space for alternative food initiatives that promote sustainability and to allocate more financial resources for this purpose.



Jointly investigate what an ideal supermarket in Moerwijk could look like.
Source: Edit Tuboly.

produced; and depend on outside impetus to improve their food environment. These assumptions have been proved to be very wrong in this particular area. Residents experience daily disadvantages from the system, whether it concerns food or other aspects of life (health, education, economy). They feel like unwanted extras in society. Poverty is a multidimensional problem, and a single approach to combatting it won't work. Food can be a starting point for addressing multiple aspects of poverty: inclusion, empowerment, community building, economic opportunities, social cohesion, health and education.

1. How do we deal with local voices that are not interested in food transition or a healthy, just food environment?

We were careful in choosing the community to work with. The ideas from the community expressed in the petition were a good basis. Through their participation in the Round Table, the idea of having a vegan section in the supermarket is now put forward by the community and the cultural diversity in food offer is being emphasized more. We learned from this community that assumptions in the dominant narrative are not valid or need to be understood by looking at underlying causes; and how people feel patronized by outside initiatives.

2. How do we facilitate dialogue with communities and how to bring these voices to the national level?

We assumed it would be beneficial to enlist the help of a local network to connect us with the petitioners and the surrounding community, which worked out well. We were also fortunate to have an anthropologist researcher who had a good rapport with the residents. When Foodrise EU became visible as an organization, we still had to prove that we were not there to tell them what to do or take the initiative away from them. During the meeting with the residents, it was important to be flexible and open to what was brought up, to trust the group's self-correcting mechanisms, and to be mindful of the group dynamics and subculture. People were happy that we engaged the press and that they received media attention. "If nothing else, we at least got that."

The second part of the meeting was a workshop session, and it was obvious that people had a certain unease with the situation. Within the wider cultural context sub-cultures play a key role. Our learning was that it is helpful to engage a local facilitator to understand the subtext behind what people say, it's not always clear what they are really saying.

Lessons learned

Assumptions held as the dominant narrative has been that people, especially those living in low-income areas, are not interested in health aspects of food only in the prices of products; do not have much knowledge or have interest in where the food is coming from or how it is

We did not follow up with another meeting, because the municipality organized their own meetings to inform the residents. The community trusted the initiator of the petition, but failure could have undermined her position. It could easily have increased the community's feelings of powerlessness and that they do not count and could have increased the already existing distrust in the authorities even more.

Despite the successes with the local Food Strategy and Climate Deals, we were seen as a threat by the alderman dealing with the supermarket. Although residents invited us to support them for a meeting with him, the alderman declined our attendance but did not articulate the reasons. We chose to abide by the decision rather than cause conflict for the residents.

A clear difficulty is that people must communicate in their free time when they are already dealing with so many issues. At the municipal level, processes are slow, and it is not always clear who to communicate with and who is responsible for what. This can also change quickly internally and that can affect the interest and involvement of the local community, so it is important to keep the pressure on the process.

We encountered additional challenges around making citizen voices heard nationally due to the political situation in which the Minister of Agriculture refused to use the word transition in meetings with her. (This is just one small example of the temporary difficulties we had with lobbying & advocacy during the last, right-wing government. NGOs needed time to find other strategies).

3. How can we effectively influence retailers and policy makers to take up the priorities for a healthy, just, affordable, and sustainable food supply at the local and national level?

Collaborating with local organizations and networks who know the local situation well and have many contacts on the ground is very valuable. It is important to have good examples of local and alternative food initiatives to show policy makers that they are viable, have many benefits and contribute to solving multiple big problems (climate, pollution, poverty, social isolation, regional economy, etc.) at the local and regional level. This out-of-the-box thinking is important for making food system changes as we need new ways of doing things.

Knowledge about the (potential) contribution of local food initiatives needs to increase. Foodrise EU has commissioned research on behavioural change toward more sustainable choices among participants in activities such as community gardens and neighbourhood tables. Local policies that effectively improve the food environment and access to affordable, healthy food set a good example. Connecting cities and regions and learning from local experiences are important for convincing advocacy at the national and EU levels.

A democratic supermarket can represent a change from within. It's still seen as part of a dominant system, but a different model is emerging through the cracks. We intend to set up research to develop this concept into a viable option for communities including investigating alternative business models, and to make this part of the transformation of the food system.

A sound business model is crucial. While large corporations receive enormous subsidies, local food initiatives are expected to operate independently. Lobbying for more funding for these initiatives could be an option. While this form of redistribution may not be the solution, it will allow us to experiment with alternative business models, and it can help bridge the gap until the initiative becomes sustainable.

Recommendations to organizations wanting to work with voices of citizens

Be sensitive about the language that you use, the settings for meetings, for the group dynamics and several sub-cultures in an area. Do not come with solutions but listen carefully to what is really being said. The help of a local facilitator who understands the conditions of the people can help to bridge the gap. Make sure you are not promising too much and be clear about your intentions and what can be expected from your organization. Ownership about the process should remain with the residents. Power dynamics are subtle, so you must be aware of that all the time, as well of the structural, underlying causes of poor food environments.

We all need food. Food is a human rights issue. Food can be a good entry point to lift a neighbourhood by connecting it to social, economic, health, and education aspects, to inclusion and empowerment, and contributing to the transformation of the food system. You have to be aware of the power dynamics held within you, before you can change the system itself.

Recommendations to local decision-makers

Break down the silos between the municipal divisions and work crosscutting as food should be present in every discussion and decision making. It touches all aspects of life, including infrastructure, employment, energy, spatial planning, and climate.

Do not be afraid to listen to the voices of people. Common ground should be the right to affordable, sustainable and just healthy food by all. Debunk food myths and create mechanisms that place people at the centre of the food system.

Support local food initiatives, especially when local/regional and plant-based products are promoted and

support the promotion of knowledge about food production and consumption, and food skills.

Support local food networks and facilitate space and financial support for initiatives. Make sure the support is tailor-made for the initiative and focus area. The subsidy requirements often don't align with these local food initiatives, as they develop organically and gradually. They don't fit into a box, and their impact can often only be assessed in retrospect. The requirements should be aligned accordingly. Contribute to weaving the web of food for poverty reduction, healthy communities and the right to healthy food for all.

Learn from the good examples and amplify these through the networks of local authorities and promote them at the national level.

Joint campaign on retail sector – CAN France

CAN France worked with people experiencing food poverty and students to shape supermarket policy demands. Their unique shift was from advocating “fewer harmful promotions” to “*more positive promotions on healthy, sustainable food*”, adapting to community realities while safeguarding against corporate misuse.

Towards more positive promotions on healthy, sustainable food

Climate Action Network France (CAN France) is a federation of 37 national and local associations fighting against the causes of climate change, from the international to the local level. It covers all the sectors responsible for climate change (transport, energy, agriculture, etc.) and works to develop ambitious measures to combat climate change and its impacts.

On the subject of food, CAN France works with environmental, farmers, consumers, solidarity and health associations to accelerate the transition to a healthy, sustainable and fair food system. In 2023, CAN France published its first report on the responsibility of supermarkets in the transition to healthy, sustainable food. We took part in the ‘Food Voices’ project to deepen our collaboration with our partners who carry the voice of populations facing food poverty, with the aim of producing more inclusive and adapted narratives and recommendations, as part of our wider program of work dedicated to the transition of mass food retailing.

Our initial learning question was: How can the mediatization of communities’ expectations and of the challenges they face when they purchase food contribute to changing the dominant narrative according to which ‘consumers just want cheap food’?

Context

CAN France has forged partnerships with 3 member associations: Secours Catholique, which fights against the precariousness of people; Act against Hunger France, which fights for access for all to healthy and sustainable food; the Students’ Network for a sustainable and cohesive society. Our shared objective was to work with people affected by food poverty to publicize and disseminate their experiences, and to discuss and co-construct recommendations for supermarkets and public authorities.



The report “Retailers: allies or barriers to the transition towards healthy and sustainable food for all?”. Source: CAN-F.

Description

Secours Catholique and Act Against Hunger France implemented 2 series of 5 workshops in 2 different locations (suburban area next to Paris and rural area in the Alps region) between November 2024 and February 2025, about the problems and expectations that people facing food poverty deal with when shopping in supermarkets. This work was highlighted through the production of [a short movie](#) (17 minutes) and fed the co-construction of policy recommendations by CAN France and its partners, including Secours Catholique, Act Against Hunger France, consumer groups and health associations.

Moreover, the Local Students Conventions for Sustainable Food project (one in Paris and one in Lyon), initiated by the Students' Network for a sustainable and cohesive society, has included a “supermarket” section in its activities as part of the ‘Food Voices’ project. The project started in November 2024, gathered 60 students from both cities and included 4 webinars, 3 days of training, 2 weekends of activities and training, and (forthcoming) 1 day of restitution of policy recommendations for local governments. Concerning mass retail specifically, debate between students led to the co-construction of recommendations and to the production of a couple of short videos (1-2 minutes) for joint campaigning with CAN France.

These activities fed the narrative and recommendations of the campaign launched by CAN France in May 2025, based on a new report, [Retailers: allies or barriers to the transition towards healthy and sustainable food for all?](#), including: 1) its second Supermarkets' scorecard; 2) the best practices of retailers in Europe; 3) a study on the barriers and levers to the just and ecological food transition of the mass retail sector. More specifically, in this 100-pages report, CAN France dedicated 6 pages to the outputs of the workshops with groups of people facing food poverty (through special sections written by Secours Catholique and Act against Hunger France), 2 pages to the outputs of the Local Students Conventions for Sustainable Food. Staff from each of the three organisations also took part in 2 workshops organized by CAN France on the development of its campaign on supermarkets' promotional offers, implemented by CAN France with consumer associations (Foodwatch, National Union of Family Associations) and health organisations (France Assos Santé, French Federation of Diabetics, National Collective of Obese Individual Associations). see the campaign [When will there be good promotions for good products?](#)

Lessons

It proved difficult to answer our initial learning question, i.e. how can the mediatization of communities' expectations and of the challenges they face when they purchase food contribute to changing the dominant narrative according to which ‘consumers just want cheap food’? Indeed, although we did emphasize this narrative in our report and campaign, we had difficulty assessing to what extent the way we communicated on communities' expectations and challenges helped or contributed to changing this dominant narrative. We had feedback from various partners and journalists that the quotes

from people facing food poverty, throughout the report, were useful to show that the measures we recommend answer people's problems and expectations, including people facing food poverty – and not only from an elite.

This project provided wider meaningful lessons. Firstly, CAN France had initially in mind to team up with consumer and health groups to demand a decrease in supermarkets' promotional offers for unhealthy and unsustainable food. The discussions of the groups of people facing food poverty implemented by Secours Catholique and Act against Hunger suggested that it would be more adequate to demand an increase in supermarkets' promotional offers for healthy and sustainable products, as asking for ‘less promotional offers’ – whatever the quality of the targeted products – was perceived as negative and stressful – because this could lead to a loss in terms of purchasing capacity. It also highlighted the necessity to also emphasize the necessity of comprehensive public policies to improve access to healthy and sustainable food, through the regulation of margins from food manufacturers and retailers, and through the growth of the food purchasing capacity of people facing food poverty due to lack of income.

Secondly, this project, which we discussed and tried to partner with multiple actors from different fields and with different priorities, enabled us to have a wider and more comprehensive understanding of the issues and potential pitfalls of our narratives and recommendations. Indeed, on top of charity, health and consumer organisations, we also discussed our campaign with fair trade and farmer groups. Unexpectedly, most of them were sceptical and worried about our recommendations because of the balance of power in the value chain and the predominance of the mass-retail groups and big food manufacturers. A specific concern was that demanding more promotional offers for healthy and sustainable products could be ‘absorbed’ and used at their advantage by prevailing agro-industrial groups, without questioning the current problematic power relations in the food system. Worst case scenario was, because of the opacity and lack of regulation of trade negotiations, the probability of more promotional offers for healthy and sustainable food resulting in abusive trade conditions and economic requirements imposed on small and medium enterprises and farmers, such as those providing organic and fair-trade products. Thanks to this concerned/alarmed but constructive feedback, we decided to add complementary ‘safeguard’ measures aiming to avoid such adverse side effects.

Recommendations

To NGOs

- Discuss the *tentative/provisional* narrative and policy recommendations of your campaign with the multiplicity of diverse organisations and groups representing people (consumers, people facing food poverty, farmers, etc.) who are or could be concerned and/or impacted by your campaign and truly consider their feedback and input to adjust or transform your narrative and recommendations. This would strengthen the narrative and recommendations of the campaign, to reduce the risk of bad buzz and backlash and to build new alliances and obtain more support from diverse constituencies.

To supermarkets

NB : this is a selection of some of the recommendations in the report of CAN France, [Retailers: allies or barriers to the transition towards healthy and sustainable food for all?](#)

- Offer mainly promotions on healthy foods (fruit and vegetables, pulses, nuts, whole grains) and more promotions on organic products, by including them in themed and seasonal promotional campaigns. In a spirit of shared responsibility, commit to ensuring that these promotional campaigns are co-financed by suppliers, who cover the price reductions, and distributors, who cover the costs of advertising.
- Moderate your margins on healthy and sustainable products such as fruit and vegetables and organic and fair-trade products to make them more affordable to consumers while ensuring fair remuneration for suppliers.
- Restrict communications and advertising about low prices that destroy the value of food and willingness to pay for more expensive quality products.

To policymakers

NB : this is a selection of some of the recommendations in the report of CAN France, [Retailers: allies or barriers to the transition towards healthy and sustainable food for all?](#)

- Require retailers to offer mostly promotions on healthy foods (fruit and vegetables, legumes, nuts, whole grains) and more promotions for organic products. Ensure that these promotional offers are systematically co-financed between the supplier and the distributor, with the latter financing the costs of promotion, and adapt the terms of co-financing for promotions for micro-businesses and SMEs engaged in organic or fair-trade production, so as not to undermine their economic viability.
- Ensure transparency in the margins of manufacturers and distributors to promote a more equitable distribution of value among the various links in the chain, to better protect micro-businesses and SMEs and ensure fair remuneration for farmers.
- Require food distributors and manufacturers to moderate their margins on healthy and sustainable products such as fruit, vegetables and organic products to make them more affordable for consumers.
- Set ambitious sales targets for healthy and sustainable products (fruit and vegetables, pulses, organic foods, fair trade products) for distributors, while increasing the visibility and promotion of these products in stores (end caps, central aisles, etc.).
- Strengthen financial support for low-income individuals to access healthy and sustainable food (cash transfers, cards offering discounts on healthy and sustainable products, etc.).

Joint action for food transition in Galicia – CECU (Spain)

CECU has collaborated with residents in the region close to As Conchas (Galicia) to reframe conflicts related to pollution as a struggle between community and the corporate food system. By defending fundamental rights, they achieved a historic court ruling recognising water pollution as a violation of human rights. They have also promoted a regional alliance in Galicia to demand a fair and healthy food system. Agricultural, environmental and social economy organisations joined forces to form ACUGA.

VOLTAR AOS MERCADOS E E FEIRAS

Realidade ou utopía nos tempos actuais?



"Return to public markets: reality or utopia in the current times?". Source: ACUGA.

Defending fundamental human rights

CECU is a federation that brings together nine regional consumer organisations from different parts of Spain, representing a total of 30,000 families. We are involved in various national and European networks and alliances to promote a transition to healthy diets that are also fair to agricultural workers and respectful of the land, using a consumer rights perspective.

Our experience tells us that, sometimes, an issue that may be common to different people or organisations ends up generating conflicts because there is no space for dialogue

and understanding, shared problems are not recognised, and no consensus is reached on possible solutions and joint demands that would benefit all parties involved. This is very frequently seen, for example, between agricultural organisations and environmental organisations. Similarly, these demands also fail to gain social acceptance among the people living in the affected area.

We have decided to join the Food Voices Coalition because we consider that we have similar goals in the struggle for a sustainable and healthy food system: individuals can and must become aware and take responsibility for critical and transformative consumption, but what we really need is for

political and business actors to assume their responsibility and offer us healthy food environments, as well as guaranteeing a sustainable and fair agricultural and food model for all people.

We considered the following initial learning questions:

- How to diversify and unite movements to challenge the existing narratives on healthy, sustainable, affordable, accessible and fair food?
- How to join multi-sectorial stakeholders to effectively influence policymakers or retailers?
- How can local grassroots influence councils to strengthen healthy and sustainable local food chains?

Context

We have been working to create a regional alliance in Galicia which, among its main objectives, includes the right to a fair, healthy and sustainable food model. The context for promoting this initiative has been the contamination of the As Conchas reservoir in A Limia, a small region of Galicia. The collective conclusion was that we needed to unite and work together to denounce the situation and propose alternatives.

Over the last year, we have promoted the union of different social organisations and residents of the area in two activities: filing a lawsuit against those responsible for the pollution, which has also affected drinking water; and creating an alliance of organisations that promote critical and transformative food consumption.

The aim of carrying out these two activities in parallel was that, while we were bringing together different people and organisations with a common goal (but which had encountered difficulties), there would be a parallel process that would generate enough energy to give continuity to the process. On the one hand, a medium- to long-term goal (the creation of the alliance) fuelled by a short-term goal (that those responsible for the pollution and its consequences be identified and assume their responsibilities).

Description

As Conchas is a reservoir that has been an example of conservation and enjoyment for the entire population. It had become polluted in recent years, causing bad odours and affecting the drinking water consumed by local residents. The source of the pollution was the amount of waste generated by numerous chicken farms and family-run potato fields, which used large amounts of chemicals.

Environmental organisations criticised the intensive production model for these products, but farmers (and most residents) were not totally in favour of these demands because it was the main source of income for their families and there were no viable alternatives in the area. For most of the population, economic survival was more important than having a pleasant environment and easy access to drinking water: this conflict was very real.

Last year, the [annual Nos Plantamos meeting](#) (an activity associated with this project) was held in that area and, among other things, it served to visit the affected area and learn about the problem. Organisations from different sectors were present, which allowed us to learn about the problem, but also to engage in constructive dialogue. What did we learn and what conclusions did we draw from that space?

- We discovered that, although most of the producers were small family farms, practically all of them produced for two large food companies that forced them to use intensive production practices.
- We understood that the specific problems of each group (neighbours, producer families, environmental organisations, etc.) stemmed from a mutual problem: a regional food system controlled by two large companies.
- We identified the real culprit behind the pollution: it was not the families who produced the food, but the two large companies that forced them to produce in this way.
- We also identified who was allowing all this to happen: the regional government, which did not set limits or generate economic and employment alternatives for the population.
- We understood that what had previously divided us now had to unite us: we needed to defend a new regional food system that, while providing healthy food to the population, would allow producers to carry out their activities in a sustainable manner with economic guarantees and protect the territory in which they live and work.

For now, the strategic line we have begun follows two directions:

As our first action we have joined a [collective complaint](#) alongside the local residents, with the support of Client Earth and Friends of the Earth Galicia, against the Xunta de Galicia (regional government) for political inaction: for allowing intensive pig and poultry farming to pollute the

As Conchas reservoir (Ourense) for decades. It has been an opportunity to unite residents and the environmental organisation in a single action, which has been accepted by the other organisations. The [justice system has ruled in our favour](#) and recognised that the human rights of the population had been violated due to the inaction of the authorities in the face of pollution caused by industrial livestock waste. This ruling has set a precedent throughout Europe, opening up opportunities for all communities affected by pollution caused by large-scale livestock farms. We hope that this will set a precedent for public administrations to assume their responsibility in promoting healthy and sustainable food models. We also believe that it is a morale boost for the population and various social organisations, encouraging them to fight for a transformation of the regional food model.

Subsequently, we have started a pilot project to organise different territorial actors in the defence of environmental and social rights based on food. Organisations of different types have come together to create an alliance with the aim of defending, among other things, a fair and sustainable food model that offers the population access to healthy and locally sourced food. This alliance currently consists of organisations linked to food production (Sindicato Labrego Galego, SLG), environmentalists (Friends of the Earth Galicia), social and solidarity economy (REAS) and ethical banking (FIARE) and has taken the name ACUGA (Association of Consumers and Users of Galicia). CECU has facilitated its creation under its national umbrella, offering support in its creation, objectives and, hopefully, the vision that real change can be achieved through critical consumption. It is undoubtedly the first experience of defending consumer rights from this perspective.

The process of forming ACUGA has generated consensus among the organisations that have joined, but also among the society affected by the problems mentioned above. This new alliance is also based on one of the initial principles of the Food Voices Coalition: "Not for us, up to you". This means that citizens have their share of responsibility, but the food system we have is not our fault, it is the fault of powerful agents (public administrations, industries and supermarkets) and we must demand that they take responsibility for turning the system around. In these first few months of ACUGA's existence, an [event](#) has been organised calling for the recovery of agroecological markets, and a research is being conducted into public opinion on access to healthy and sustainable food.

We believe that part of the success of this alliance is innovation (as we said, this is the first time that an alliance of this type has been created from the perspective of consumption) and the way in which we have come

together and work together. The sincerity and trust in the organisations that have joined forces and with which we interact has allowed us to be transparent and not hide or conceal any of our individual objectives. This also allows us to explore options for joint action between diverse agents who, at times, may have different specific objectives. The right to make mistakes and the hope of achieving a fairer life are key points on our path forward.

Lessons

How to diversify and unite movements to challenge the existing narratives on healthy, sustainable, affordable, accessible and fair food?

Accepting differences, understanding shared problems, and achieving a common goal, despite different realities and concerns, allows new narratives to be created. One example has been the change from the initial message (the blame lies with chicken and pig producers, who have intensive farms that pollute the reservoir) to the final message (there is a company that is forcing families to produce chickens and pigs intensively, and this is causing pollution of the reservoir, which the regional government is allowing).

How to join multi-sectorial stakeholders to effectively influence policymakers or retailers?

Think about different ways of relating to each other, both in terms of dialogue and in terms of objectives and ways of acting. Identify a mutual problem, recognise and accept differences, and seek solutions that benefit everyone.

We still don't know if this union and our strategy will get policymakers or retailers to change their ways, but it's a first step, and we're hopeful we can make it happen. If not, we'll try to build a fairer alternative food system. What we do know is that this union has been possible.

How can local grassroots influence councils to strengthen healthy and sustainable local food chains?

Our experience is trying two ways of doing this. First, through the courts, so that justice demands accountability and sets a precedent for public administrations to assume their responsibility to legislate for the common good. Second, by creating a network and social movement around food, linking the right to healthy consumption with the demand for sustainable production that is economically and labour-wise viable.

Recommendations

This process has taught us several lessons.

In the collaborative work between social organisations, we believe that thinking beyond what we are used to doing has its benefits. To achieve this, it is very enriching to interact with those people and organisations with whom we have significant differences and conflicts, to seek common goals and joint actions that can be more powerful.

To generate social support and even involve the population, it is important not to blame them for the situations that occur around them. We need to understand their circumstances, understand why they act or think in a

certain way, and seek alternatives with them. In many cases, those truly responsible are above any citizen, and it is necessary to identify them and seek possible tools for joint action.

Finally, the favourable judicial process has taught us that it is possible to claim the human right to a healthy and sustainable environment. Sometimes, to advance specific objectives (for example, the transition to a healthy and sustainable regional food model), it is necessary to activate other parallel tools. It is still too early to confirm this, but we hope that this legal process will help the local population to support this transition and that both the public administrations and the large food industries operating in the area will assume their responsibility.

Food Voices – Terra! (Italy)

Terra! focused its work on communities in Rome affected by food insecurity and the fact that this is not simply about lacking access to sufficient food in terms of quantity and quality but is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Beyond the material aspect of need, it also includes intangible factors that deeply affect social relationships, sense of belonging, and psychological well-being. Terra! worked with communities to link transition efforts to ecological and social justice, demonstrating the potential of grassroots campaigns in urban settings, and contributed greatly in setting up the Food Policy Council.

Link transition efforts to ecological and social justice

Terra! is an environmental association with the aim of transforming food systems to achieve ecological, environmental and social sustainability.

Terra! carries out research and investigation activities on the nexus that links intensive agriculture and animal farming to climate change and workers' exploitation in the fields to supermarkets' economic dynamics.

We wanted to take part in the Food Voices Coalition alongside our colleagues in Europe because the project very much aligns with our goals: we believe that there can be no environmental justice without social justice.

The ecological transition is the challenge of our time, but it must be built on the pillars of equity and solidarity, this is why:

- **We connect:** the cooperative approach and the ability to connect and work with different actors are distinctive features of the organization that enable Terra! to understand and respond to ecological and social challenges with a systemic and transformative approach.
- **Investigative work:** Understanding the problems is the first step towards solving them. For this reason, Terra! has been carrying out investigative work and field research, with the aim of highlighting critical issues and proposing solutions, reinforcing its proposals with advocacy campaigns aimed at institutions and businesses.



The pear symbol of the campaign to stop the market's obsession with "aesthetic perfection" in fruits and vegetables. The campaign urge supermarkets to sell and promote second-grade produce. Source: Terra!

- **We work** in institutional spaces and in partnership with associations, committees and civil society organisations to defend natural resources and promote a development model based on respect for ecosystems. An example of our work was carried out in the context of the promotion of local food policies to achieve the establishment of the Food Council of Rome. Terra! played a major role in promoting and coordinating the only network in Europe that has managed to obtain an urban food policy through a bottom-up process.

We believe that a fairer and more sustainable future can only be built together!

Our learning questions

1. How to change the narrative about food insecurity, by giving voice to the most affected communities in analyses on its causes and strategies to address it?
2. How to promote key changes in supermarkets' food environments enabling their food justice-oriented transformation, while depolarising the debate on the ecological transition and fostering collaborative solutions able to deliver benefits to producers and citizens?

Context

In Italy approximately six million people live in a condition of food insecurity, i.e. 12% of residents aged at least 16. As elsewhere, within the global trend that is moving in this direction, over the last three years social inequalities have dramatically increased, due to the economic crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, the growing increase in international conflicts and the worsening of the climate crisis. This is forcing an increasingly large number of people to significantly reduce their purchasing power or even pushing them into conditions of poverty or food insecurity. Despite an increase in the volume of public resources intended to support the food expenditure of families in difficulty, Italian policies to contrast food insecurity were met with failure. The reason for this failure can be identified in the lack of a more profound understanding of the phenomenon of food insecurity. Food insecurity is in fact a complex phenomenon, characterised by a multidimensional nature, which embraces deeply intertwined and highly variable economic, cultural, social and psychological factors in relation to different contexts.

Within this framework, Terra! decided to focus its case on people affected by food insecurity as the main community affected by the most serious forms of food system-related injustice. Terra! identified Rome's 3rd Municipality, a municipality that is home to 205,800 inhabitants. It is one of the areas with the highest levels of social hardship in the city, according to the main socioeconomic and urban indicators. This general condition is compounded by a territorial configuration that further hinders access to food: limited presence of supermarkets, reduced local retail options, only two active neighbourhood markets (Tufello and Val Melaina), and a scarce restaurant offering. The 3rd Municipality is also characterized by a high number of single-person households (45% of all households), a significant elderly population (25% of residents), and approximately 19,000 residents of foreign origin.

The Case: Food Voices

Our case study falls within the scope of the first of the two learning questions. Food insecurity is not simply about lacking access to sufficient food in terms of quantity and quality but is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Beyond the material aspect of need, it also includes intangible factors that deeply affect social relationships, sense of belonging, and psychological well-being.

To explore this complexity, we chose to give a direct voice to people who experience food insecurity daily by conducting three focus groups with women, elderly people, and adolescents. Through this qualitative method, we aimed to highlight the various dimensions, characteristics, and dynamics of the phenomenon, considering the socio-economic, demographic, and cultural specificities of each group. The focus groups enabled us to collect lived experiences, perceptions, and needs related to food, offering a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of the issue. The goal was to reflect on current practices addressing food insecurity and identify possible elements of innovation to introduce in existing responses, in relation to the context and local actors previously described.

For this reason, we focused on three particularly significant vulnerability profiles – women, the elderly, and adolescents – which form the basis for critically questioning current policies and guiding us towards more integrated and multidimensional approaches.

A Geography of Food Solidarity in the 3rd Municipality

Within the territory of Rome's 3rd Municipality, numerous actors are actively engaged in fighting food insecurity. A systematic mapping of these resources is still lacking. Among the most active are ASTRA, the Portierato Sociale initiative (a meeting point that can sign post residents to local support and services), the CRI Emporium of Monte San Giusto, the San Frumenzio parish, the Puzzle association (with welfare partnership projects), and food education initiatives run in collaboration with organizations like "Capra e Cavoli." Building a "geography of solidarity" could help better understand the links between food insecurity and social exclusion and recognize these places not only as sources of material aid but also as tools for relational and cultural inclusion.



A woman shops at Emporio Astra, one of the neighbourhood's local social centres, located inside a historic community centre. Source: Simone Spirito/Terra!.

Main Needs and Emerging Vulnerabilities

Elderly: isolation, health, and relationships

Elderly people make up the majority of users of social services and the Portierato Sociale, (73% Italians, 49% women; 570 people served over 18 months). Economic fragility – many live on minimum pensions of about €600 – is compounded by social isolation and lack of medical care. Food for them holds emotional and relational value, and places like senior centres or the Portierato Sociale – through shared meals and social moments – become essential spaces to combat marginalization.

Women: care burden and multiple vulnerabilities

Women are the majority of users of the Portierato Sociale service. Their cases involve economic hardship, housing insecurity, domestic violence, and social marginalization. The burden of care work – often invisible and unrecognized – is intertwined with the daily management of food for the family. The Portierato Sociale serves as a first point of contact and a hub for referrals to other local services.

Adolescents: educational abandonment and emerging issues

Despite the presence of schools (Aristotele and Aristofane high schools, public nurseries and schools), the area records high dropout rates and pockets of illiteracy. One project involving the Parsec cooperative reported early alcohol consumption (starting at 11–12 years), often within fragile family contexts and with uncontrolled access to unhealthy food. Here, the issue is more educational and relational than strictly economic. There have also been reports of eating disorders and alcohol abuse among both youth and adults. In response, the Portierato Sociale has launched a support desk with a nutritionist to address these issues from an educational and preventive perspective.

Findings from the Focus Groups

The three focus groups with women, adolescents, and the elderly confirmed that food insecurity is strongly influenced by social, gender, and age-related factors. In addition to material difficulties, the intangible aspects of the phenomenon emerged clearly.

For women, the heaviest burden is the mental and practical load of care work, more than social stigma. For the

elderly, loneliness — perceived as a structural condition — significantly affects their relationship with food. Among younger participants, we observed a conflict between aspirations and reality: personal desires clash with economic and family constraints that limit their freedom of choice.

Food aid, although not sufficient to meet all needs, represents important support that helps reduce household expenses and enable other essential spending. While nutrition was not the central focus of our questions, many participants showed growing awareness of food quality, variety, and its health impacts.

None of the families involved live in conditions of extreme food deprivation. However, consistent with national trends, the difficulties identified relate more to diet quality and choice than to simple food availability. Social and economic inequalities significantly influence eating behaviour, though income alone is not the only factor at play.

The experiences collected challenge current responses. While material aid is useful, its impact is limited: it alleviates financial difficulties but does not address broader needs such as relationship-building, sociality, and self-determination.

It is therefore necessary to consider how to integrate new dimensions into existing responses. Some elements already present in grassroots organizations — volunteer training, welcoming spaces, access to kitchens and shared moments — form a valuable foundation for building more effective and humane approaches.

Lessons Learned

Exploring the dynamics of food insecurity made it clear that not only the consequences, but also the causes of this condition are deeply multidimensional. Income, although important, is not the only determining factor: food insecurity is strongly shaped by social, cultural, relational, and territorial conditions. This awareness requires rethinking support practices, placing at the centre not only material needs, but also understanding and addressing the more invisible and systemic aspects of the phenomenon.

Beyond structural factors, the local context — understood as a social, cultural, and institutional fabric — plays a crucial role in shaping experiences of food insecurity. This reinforces the importance of case studies that highlight local specificities and the needs of different socio-demographic groups. Such insights not only help convey the complexity of the issue, but can also guide more integrated, inclusive, and sustainable responses.

Alongside the analytical phase, a political and planning phase is essential so that access to healthy, fair, and quality food is ensured not through emergency or fragmented actions, but through structural and ongoing public policies.

This vision has materialized in the work of the Rome Food Council, which, after a year of collective deliberation — especially in the working group dedicated to food insecurity — achieved a historic result: the official inclusion of food insecurity among the priorities of Rome's Social Plan. This is a three-year planning tool guiding municipal and district-level social policies, aiming to build a fairer, more inclusive, and resilient city.

Food insecurity is no longer seen as a temporary emergency, but as a systemic challenge requiring structural interventions. Institutions have taken up the demands of grassroots organizations and active citizenship, translating them into concrete actions. A recent example is the presentation of a municipal resolution shaped by proposals from social networks, civic hubs, and academia. It provides for:

- the transformation of solidarity stores into open-access spaces with dedicated help desks, services, and food education programmes.
- the creation of new distribution points in underserved areas.
- the strengthening of territorial welfare, promoting real synergy between public services and third-sector organizations, with a focus on civic hubs.

This marks a paradigm shift: from emergency response to structured planning, from passive distribution to the recognition of dignity, participation, and the right to food for all.

1. How to change the narrative about food insecurity, by giving voice to the most affected communities in analyses on its causes and strategies to address it?

Our case study showed us that part of the answer lay in how we asked the question in the first place. By listening directly to the voices of the communities most affected — women, the elderly, and adolescents — we began to shift our perspective on the phenomenon, moving beyond a logic of one-way aid toward a deeper, more participatory understanding of food insecurity.

This approach allowed us not only to make often-overlooked dimensions visible — such as relational, psychological, and educational aspects — but also to build intervention strategies

that are closer to people's everyday realities. Creating space for lived experiences meant recognizing subjectivities, skills, and needs that typically escape statistics but are central to imagining fairer, more integrated, and generative responses.

In this sense, the process of listening wasn't just a preliminary step but the heart of the change itself. That's where the dominant narrative on food insecurity began to shift — from an exclusively economic phenomenon to a multidimensional condition requiring equally complex responses.

Recommendations

It is essential to create stable, structured spaces for dialogue where citizens can actively contribute to shaping public policy, especially on issues concerning social rights and collective well-being, such as access to food. These spaces must not be occasional consultations, but permanent instruments of participatory democracy that ensure a direct, transparent, and effective connection with the institutions responsible for designing and implementing public policies. Only through continuous and structured dialogue is it possible to build shared responses rooted in the real needs of communities and aimed at equity.

2. How to promote key changes in supermarkets' food environments enabling their food justice-oriented transformation, while depolarising the debate on the ecological transition and fostering collaborative solutions able to deliver benefits to producers and citizens?

Other actions have addressed this question — most notably our work on the issue of “calibre.” Terra! launched a national campaign and [petition](#) to say **stop** the market's obsession with “aesthetic perfection” in fruits and vegetables. The campaign urged supermarkets to sell and promote [second-grade produce](#).

Only “perfect” fruits and vegetables — those graded as Extra or Category I — make it to supermarket shelves. All others, known as **Category II** products, are typically excluded, even if they are perfectly edible, healthy, and nutritious, and although current regulations allow them to be marketed. Enforcing such standards leads directly to food loss.

In Europe, a dense regulatory framework sets strict aesthetic standards for fruit and vegetables, most recently through [Delegated Regulation \(EU\) 2023/2429](#), in force since January 2025. This regulation defines size, colour, and appearance standards for a range of produce: for example, the minimum diameter for an orange is 53 mm, and for an apple 60 mm.

Anything that doesn't meet these visual standards — like smaller fruits or those bearing marks from climate-related events such as drought — is mostly sold to processing industries (for juice or jam) at prices that are often not fair to farmers. In many cases, this produce is not even harvested, left to rot in the fields because harvesting costs outweigh potential revenue. A standard originally meant to guarantee quality becomes instead a driver of food loss, environmental waste, economic damage to farmers, and reduced food availability for consumers.

Although the new regulation introduced some adjustments to reduce food waste — in line with the *Farm to Fork* strategy — they are still too limited and do not affect the structure of a market dominated by large retailers. These retailers continue to favour perfect products, penalizing small or irregular ones even when they're fully edible.

But daily reality reminds us loudly: with ongoing climate change, this approach is no longer sustainable. Extreme weather events — from hail to late frosts and prolonged drought — already jeopardize the abundance and appearance of harvests. The continuous shrinkage of productive farmland in Italy over the last five years is telling: -23% pears, -11% peaches, -8% nectarines, -7% apricots, -6% kiwis and plums.

Continuing to exclude “out-of-calibre” produce and limit access to Category II fruits and vegetables means increasing waste, putting entire local supply chains at risk, and pushing agriculture toward even more intensive and environmentally harmful models.

Recommendations

Tackling the issue of product “calibre” means rethinking the entire food production model: we need **more flexible rules**, **more inclusive markets**, and a **consumption culture** that values quality and sustainability over mere appearance. Every “imperfect” fruit, if edible, can nourish someone and support a farmer's income — provided we stop rejecting it for superficial reasons.

This is why continued public pressure is essential, urging supermarkets to do their part: make more space for second-grade fruits and vegetables, display them clearly, make them affordable, and value them appropriately — both for producers and consumers. These actions, and the associated [petition](#), say “enough” to **invisible food waste** — the kind that begins long before the food reaches us, in the very fields where it's grown.

Dessert – Reflections and next steps



Source: Olga Jachimek.

We are one of the many voices in Europe and around the world, all demanding a food system where people – not corporations – decide what good food looks like. A system that delivers healthy, fair, sustainable and affordable food to all, especially those most affected by inequality, health disparities, and environmental harm. Healthy food is a human right.

Our starting point was to focus on supermarkets and the role they play in the food system. We understand the problems, with an average 80% of their promotions being unhealthy, 60% of their offer is animal-sourced produce, profit oriented, and not having the primary aim to provide healthy, accessible food that makes communities thrive. We have been investigating what the levers could be to make supermarkets change their role. Every step is important and contributes a little to a more sustainable food system.

Awareness about the food systems varies. Students and youngsters in France and Poland and probably in other countries too, have to travel a distance to reach an understanding of unprocessed food. It is important to educate and connect them again to the source, as they will determine the future of our food system. At the same time, many assumptions in the dominant narrative are not correct, or much more nuanced for good reasons. These need to be addressed. Many communities in food deserts are very much aware that they are marginalized by the profit-making retailer industry. We must nourish the seeds of resistance and the food initiatives coming from communities.

What became very clear in this project is that it is important to build bridges between different stakeholders and that it is important to look at the causes, not the symptoms, even if industry and policy makers want us to believe otherwise when it is in their interest.

The narratives need to change!

When considering the recommendations at the national and especially the EU level, we must ask ourselves what added value the direct voices of citizens' approach offer. Does it lead to a different kind of recommendation?

People, especially in low-income areas or living in food deserts or swamps, have a lived experience of the negative impacts of the current food system. They understand very well that the system is not working for them, but that they are constrained by it, with consequences on their quality of living, including health and life-expectancy. From this constrained position, what are their recommendations to transform the food system? In what way can these enrich the already huge number of existing recommendations? And how do we ensure that together we are powerful enough to reach a tipping point that moves in the right direction?

We will need both approaches – bottom-up and top-down – but how do we connect these better? Often local voices are used to raise awareness about existing problems and to give legitimacy to recommendations. Could there be another added value that is linked to an outsider perspective? We need more examples to answer this question.

We would like to continue exploring the voices of citizens' approach for food system change. You can join us!

Coffee – Call to action

Our call to action varies depending on the topic and occasion. This is an example of our call to action on developing the Agriculture Vision 2025.

Our Call to Action

We respectfully call on you, Mr. Christophe Hansen, as European Commissioner for Agriculture and Food, to join us in transforming retail practices that maintain an unhealthy, unequal and unsustainable food system. We urge you to ensure that food is produced, distributed and consumed in ways that respect the planet, uphold human rights and animal welfare, empower communities and support equitable economics.

In particular, we ask you to:

- listen to the voices of citizens expressing their concerns in the light of alarming data regarding health, increasing poverty, and the growing impact of natural disasters caused by climate change.
- continue inclusive dialogue and broad cooperation between stakeholders in the whole chain, inspired by the European Strategic Dialogue, and establish structures to strengthen the regulations on sustainable food systems.
- make mandatory the labelling of food products indicating environmental impact and – farming methods for animal products.
- promote the transition away from intensive animal farming, which is a significant source of EU agricultural emissions, environmental pollution and requires a huge amount of resources. A system that is unfair for rural communities and workers as well.
- promote the transition to a more plant-based diet (such as pulses, nuts and whole grains, fruits and vegetables) by making an action plan for plant-based foods.
- discourage the promotion of unhealthy and unsustainable products in supermarkets and by retailers by banning advertising and marketing of these products.
- increase support for organic farming and farmers who follow agro-ecological practices and promote policies that make organic produce more accessible and affordable for all.
- include our recommendations in your Vision on Agriculture & Food.

We like to thank Healthy Food Healthy Planet for supporting our journey as the Food Voices Coalition. The responsibility of the content of the report is with the participating organizations:

ALTAA France	https://www.altaa.org/
CAN France	https://reseauactionclimat.org/
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Foodrise UK United Kingdom	https://foodrise.org.uk/
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