

CoP Compact #9 – Session Summary

Living Lab Leuven

Food Connects – a Food Strategy for the City of Leuven (Belgium)

29.01.2025



Case description

- The "Food Connects: Strategy of Leuven (2018) has been co-created with a diversity of stakeholders (e.g. universities, NGOs for vulnerable groups, farmers' organizations etc.). It started with the question "How can we make the regional agri-food systems more sustainable, while being in line with the climate-neutral aspirations of the City of Leuven?"
- The main objectives of Leuven's Food Strategy are: 1. **Promoting healthy and sustainable food** (awareness education), 2. **Bringing food consumers and producers closer** (shorter food chains), 3. **Giving space to sustainable food production** (e.g. community gardens), 4. **Commit to sustainable agriculture** (e.g. leasehold agriculture initiatives to promote sustainable agri-food projects), 5. **Sustainable and healthy food products accessible to all** (e.g. neighborhood meals), 6. **Preventing food loss and reusing surpluses** (give-away boxes in community centers), 7. **Encouraging innovation for sustainable agri-food** (experimental crops).
- Due to internal financial constraints, the Food Strategy's program facilitator role has ended. The Sustainability Department of the City of Leuven sustainability took over, but has little capacity to work on the further development of the food strategy. Still, a lot is happening through a network of independent food organizations (e.g. city community centers, community restaurants and gardens, social grocery shops, food hubs & waste initiatives etc.)
- The three challenges LL Leuven is faced with in relation to the Food Strategy are:
 - 1. How to keep the diverse stakeholders involved after the start-up phase of the food strategy?
 - 2. How to ensure the sustainable development of the project and keep them on the right track?
 - 3. How to change food habits?

Take-home lessons

- Regarding social inclusivity and equal accessibility to healthy food and well-being, a tangible result from the Food Strategy efforts is the creation of **the City Community Health Centres**, providing free health care services (doctors, psychologists, nutritionist) with the focus on targeting the needs of and access to those who lack the financial means for "mainstream" healthcare. Other than providing a service, these health centres have the potential to positively change food behaviors via healthy nutrition education and awareness campaigns.
- The City of Leuven's participation in the Horizon project [Good Food at School](#) on making healthy food more available in schools of Leuven, shows potential for creating stronger synergies with the wider EU food project network (e.g. knowledge circulation & financial support), while connecting the project to local initiatives, such as [Kortom Leuven](#) (local farmers supplying schools with produce).
- To ensure the sustainable development of the project and increase stakeholder engagement, impact assessment of the objectives and its activities are key to demonstrate the effectiveness of an intervention. Impact monitoring generates the necessary data for impact reports and provides accountability for results. By involving stakeholder in the process of impact monitoring and creating shared accountability, the chance is higher that stakeholders feel more committed to continuing the activities, when the impact of their actions can be seen.
 - The creation of Leuven's digital food system mapping tool and community action platform [EcoFoodMap](#) (400+ food indicators) is an example of the mapping of food system activities and can be used as a platform to assess the impact of the strategy's activities.
- The designation of lands by the City of Leuven for sustainable agricultural projects in 2020 (in line with values of the food strategy), led to 15 projects run by farmers that are leasing land long-term (28 years) and at a lower price than the regular market. This is an example of incentivizing farmers to farm in sustainable ways and could be practiced by non-state actors (e.g. social businesses working with leasing projects). These social businesses receive rent from farmers and the social businesses in return invest money in further food strategy-related activities that have a social and/or environmental impact. These extra financial flows coming in from non-state actors can ensure more financial sustainability the further development of Leuven's food strategy.

Discussion

- On the challenge of stakeholder engagement and the lack of financial incentives for long-term commitment of stakeholders, **Aleksandra asks** the audience whether they know other ways of keeping stakeholders engaged and creating a feeling of community/belonging?
- **Andreas comments:** "I think impact monitoring of activities also has to do with improved stakeholder engagement. With impact monitoring, an activity becomes something tangible and measurable. In the end, people feel connected to something and stay connected when they can see the impact of their actions."
- **Aleksandra asks** to Marie: "Is there a platform you work with that creates a community feeling between the stakeholders?"
- **Marie answers:** "We used to bring stakeholders together 1-2 a year via physical events, but that stopped when the Food Officer role disappeared. We focus on online engagement with the online EcoFoodMap platform, which has a mapping of all the food actors in Leuven that you can connect with. Within FEAST, we are testing a platform that connects all the people that work around food and vulnerable groups."
- **Livia adds:** Food democracy is also connected to community feeling. People want to choose in what way they want to eat sustainably, linked to cultural heritages and social identities. Community gardens can act as agents for food democracy and food education, where food habits can be changed through social interactions with different groups from society. Community gardens have great potential, and I think that city halls and neighbourhood administrations could give them the feeling that they are having greater impact than mere leisure activities and discuss policy matters around improving mental well-being through gardening.
- **Aleksandra comments:** There also lies potential for inviting chefs/food influencers to community gardens and teach people how to cook with local and organic produce, hence making efforts in positively changing food behaviours.
- **Arthur comments:** In Sweden Reform Motten (Reform Food) is an NGO focuses on bridging people with science and evidence-based by doing impact assessments with the community.
- **Dirk comments:** Evidence-based activities are also a matter of goal setting. By measuring these activities, a sense of "competition", or better said, feeling of improvement is created, which people can look back at and be proud of and motivating them to continue.
- **Andreas comments:** The municipality of Graz (Austria) has started an initiative called Climate Pact. All households have received an information flyer from the municipality with an open invitation to sign-up regarding certain climate policy goals and then to become a member of the corresponding climate pact. This can create a sense of commitment and collective goal setting.
- **Marie elaborates:** Within the EcoFoodMap, we have different indicators where we map initiatives and measure certain activities happening in the local food system. Updates and improvements in terms of measurement still need to be done, because that's what the map was also developed for.
- **Nadia comments:** On the challenge of changing food behaviours, in the Municipality of Bergamo we work on shorter supply chain management through public procurement. Regional food is connected to the demand of public canteens of schools and municipalities and hospitals. I believe this has a big impact on changing food behaviours, on both a social and political level.

Further reading/Annex

- [Climate Neutral Leuven 2030 network](#)
- [Private leasing sustainable food investor - Life Climate Smart Chefs network of EU chefs that support Farm 2 Fork](#)
- [Edible Cities](#) as a Food Vision for Cities.
- [Climate Pact](#)
- [EcoFoodMap](#)
- [Games on Toast](#)

Next CoP events

Wednesday 12th of February

Send your case to copfeast@gmail.com!

FEAST

www.feast2030.eu

Community of Practice Food & Health

Coordinated by:



SUSTAINABLE DESIGN FOR METROPOLITAN LANDSCAPES

Contact

Aleksandra Jovanovic
aleksandra@susmetro.eu

www.susmetro.eu

Attendees

Marie Mauer, Leuven 2030
Susan Jackson, Uni Heidelberg
Livia Cepoiu & Andreas Exner, Uni Graz
Caroline Welch, LL City Oxfordshire
Catherine Caball, LL Lemerick
Nadja Tonoli, LL City of Bergamo
Art Branny, Games on Toast
Aleksandra Jovanovic & Dirk Wascher, Susmetro



Co-funded by
the European Union

FEAST is co-funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement number 101060536. Views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

UK participant in FEAST (Good Food Oxfordshire) is supported by Innovate UK grant number 10041509 and the Swiss participant in FEAST (FiBL) is supported by the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) under contract number 22.00156.

