



Schools, universities, hospitals... cities' new allies to change the food system



- ✓ Institutions can impact both the food chain (upstream) and consumers (downstream)
- ✓ Given the volume they represent, any changes institutions make to their food practices will lead to changes in the food system
- ✓ Institutions face very specific challenges: they need to ensure large volumes and consistent supply of processed or semi-processed food.

Households are not the only food consumers in the cities. Institutions such as hospitals, schools, universities, corporate cafeterias, or even prisons, are other big players in the food system. How can a shift in their practices help a transition to a more sustainable future? And what can cities do to foster their initiatives? A recent book called *Institutions as Conscious Food Consumers* presents an overview of action in Northern America.

Promising actors with great purchasing power

The authors define foodservice in institutions as any place where food is prepared outside of the home, except restaurants and fast food outlets. Institutions have a great purchasing power. In the United States, for example, their budgets represent \$200 billion annually. As people eat more and more outside of their homes, this figure is likely to grow. **Given the volume their budgets represent, any changes institutions make to their food practices will lead to changes in the food system.**

The good news is that these institutions have started to reflect upon their potential impact on the food system. This book is a good example, as it was coordinated by Sapna Thottathil, who is Associate Director of Sustainability for the University of California's Office of the President, and her co-editor, Annelies Goger at [Social Policy Research Associates](#).

Some institutions have even started pooling their purchasing power together. For instance, [Real Food Challenge](#) gathers US colleges and universities with an aim to dedicate \$1 billion (20%) of existing university food budgets to more sustainable food by 2020. Global coalitions are also getting more and more interested in food. For example, [Healthcare without Harm](#), which is a global coalition for environmental health and justice, has included food in its portfolio.

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Food-aware institutions are therefore potential allies for local authorities in new alliances in order to challenge the existing power of large agribusinesses and retailers.

Acting both upstream and downstream the food chain

Institutions are ideally located in the food system: **they can have impacts both on the food chain (upstream) and on consumers (downstream)**. Here are examples of actions committed institutions have put on their plates:

- **Adding new local, organic and fairly sourced products** into their services,
- **Shifting to more sustainable menus**. For example, a large number of universities, schools and hospitals in the US have adopted the [Meatless Monday](#) program to encourage people to reduce their meat consumption.
- **Supporting intermediate sized companies and increasing supply chain transparency**, by adding sustainability criteria to foodservice contracts and by purchasing from new suppliers.

More generally, **institutions can help reshape the way we see food. For instance, some hospitals are starting to integrate good food as an ingredient for a better health**. Could schools and universities help us see food as the missing ingredient into good education in the future?

The book nevertheless raises interesting questions around equity aspects. Indeed, **will these new local and organic services only be offered to consumers that can pay for them?** Or will institutions manage to deliver to all consumers, regardless of their economic background?

What can cities do to help them?

Institutions are specific actors, and so the challenges they face are also very specific. These include:

- The cost of sustainable food, or, more specifically, **the perception that sustainable food is more expensive**, even if that is not always the case.
- **The need for investment in new materials and skills**. Working with new - usually less processed food - requires new storage or processing facilities and cooking equipment. Cafeteria workers may also need to be trained to work with new equipment, recipes and food safety procedures.
- **The need to ensure large volumes and consistent supply of processed or semi-processed food**. Institutions serve food to millions of people on a monthly basis and need consistent supplies of food. Intermediaries such as non-profits, agricultural extension agencies, local governments, and foundations can help facilitate connections between institutions and food producers and other supply chain entities to support the ongoing growth of local and sustainable markets.

Such challenges are levers local authorities can act upon. For instance, any urban food policy preserving agricultural land or helping local producers to pull their production together, any involvement of public institutions such as schools in order to pave the way for other institutions... will help institutions raise to their full potential as actors of change.



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Urban Food Futures would like to thank [Sapna Thottathil](#) for her inputs and comments.

Source : [Sapna Thottathil Annelies Goger \(Eds.\) \(2019\), *Institutions as Conscious Food Consumers, Leveraging Purchasing Power to Drive Systems Change*, Academic Press](#)

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