Co-creating Sustainable Food Supply Chains in Sweden: *Policy implications for governance and practice*

Summary

The Sweden hub of the Co-SFSC project, led by researchers from KTH Royal Institute of Technology, engaged with municipal, private, and civil society actors in the Bio-district Sörmland region. Practice partners included Södertälje Municipality, MatLust Development Node, and Beras International Foundation, all of which are actively involved in regional food system development and public meal provision. We studied these actors within the public food procurement system, where our intervention focused on supporting the development of sustainable short food supply chains (SFSC) through collaborative governance mechanisms. The research examined both municipal-level supply system interventions and broader regional food system developments, including the establishment of a bio-district as a territorial governance configuration.

Empirically, the project analyzed Södertälje municipality's implementation of integrated food strategies and its collaboration with regional partners. A central intervention was the co-development of a scenario-based game designed to facilitate coordination between food system practitioners, including farmers, wholesalers, and municipal kitchen staff. In parallel, the project examined the development of Bio-district Sörmland as an institutional framework to strengthen regional food system integration.The analytical focus was on how governance arrangements, infrastructures, and market practices across local, national, and transnational levels shape the feasibility of municipal procurement from local and regional producers. Particular attention was given to the role of governance coherence, the function of regional governance structures, and the incorporation of practitioner experiences in policy implementation.

Preliminary findings indicate that public procurement from local and regional farmers depends on supportive multi-level governance arrangements and enabling market practices. In addition, regional governance configurations such as bio-districts provide conditions for collaborative governance among food system actors. Finally, effective implementation of food system policies requires greater attention to the practical experiences of practitioners and the constraints imposed by existing supply system infrastructures. Strengthening connections between governance structures, supply system practices, and food system actors is therefore central to the development of sustainable short food supply chains.

Policy recommendation

The following recommendations are relevant to the strengthening of the abovementioned connections in local food systems:

1. Public procurement of food to municipalities from local farmers is dependent on supportive and enabling multi-level governance arrangements and market practices across local, national and transnational scales. Greater coherence between vertically aligned levels of governance and practice would further enable public procurement from local and regional farmers.

2. Novel regional governance configurations, such as bio-districts, provide supportive and enabling conditions for the development of collaborative governance arrangements between diverse food actors and practitioners in local and regional food systems. Governance and policy at national and transnational scales should better support the creation and continued development of such novel territorial governance configurations.

3. Food system governance and policy must pay greater attention to and cater for the diverse practical experiences of different food practitioners (i.e. farmers, logistics workers, municipal and kitchen staff) during change processes in local food systems, and the way existing supply system practices and infrastructures (or absence of infrastructures) impact and constrain practitioners.

4. The implementation of systemic food system governance that integrates diverse areas of social, environmental and economic sustainability is challenging in practice. The experience from Södertälje municipality of implementing their novel Food Supply Strategy illustrates the importance of strong leadership and the dedicated work of food advocates and public-private partnerships. Ongoing challenges include the siloed nature of municipal operations and a lack of designated resources for the active integration of food system governance in practice.

<u>Research findings</u>

Research questions

- How can municipal governance support development of SFSC?
- How can the introduction of a regional bio-district support sustainable supply chains for municipal food procurement?

Research significance

The way in which dominant industrialized and globalized forms of food production and consumption currently operate fails to provide for the multidimensional aspects of food. This leads to a range of challenges and crises related to health of humans and ecosystems, food security, the environment and climate, and also broad-ranging issues concerning equity and justice. Governing food from an integrated systems perspective is considered necessary to address these interrelated challenges and crises. While the need for integrated food system governance is discussed broadly in research, pathways for its successful implementation in practice are still unclear. The value of the transdisciplinary research in the CO-SFSC project is its focus on understanding the challenges and opportunities for everyday food practitioners, such as farmers, wholesalers, cooks and dietary staff in public agencies, to work with

implementing food governance grounded in a systems perspective, in turn improving the sustainability of food production and supply.

Key Findings with Policy Relevance

1. Public procurement of food to municipalities from local and regional farmers is dependent on supportive and enabling multi-level governance arrangements and market practices across local, national and transnational (e.g. EU) scales. Södertälje municipality's implementation of its integrative Food Supply Strategy is an important piece of the puzzle in creating these favorable conditions. Beyond this, further efforts are required to ensure governance and policy coherence across local, regional, national and transnational levels. At present, conflicts between goals and aims of governance and policy across these levels create constraints for SFSC and improving food system sustainability in practice.

2. Novel territorial governance configurations, such as bio-districts, provide supportive and enabling conditions for the development of collaborative governance arrangements between diverse food actors and practitioners in local and regional food systems. The formation and existence of bio-districts is seen as the opening up of new governance spaces for sustainable agri-food system transformations at the territorial scale (Passaro and Randelli 2022). These territorial networks can play an important role in forming integrated local and regional food system governance built on multidimensional values from a broader societal perspective. These values include, for example, diversified use of local agricultural land, enhanced local environmental and biodiversity outcomes, stronger local economies and rural development and improved consumer knowledge and awareness.

3. Food system governance and policy must pay greater attention to and cater for the diverse practical experiences of different food practitioners (i.e. farmers, logistics workers, municipal and kitchen staff) during change processes in local food systems. Incorporating a stronger focus on practical realities in food systems would assist in illustrating not only the challenges, but also the opportunities, for implementation of more systemic forms of food governance. Incorporating a greater focus on these practical realities could be achieved through the opening up of new collaborative governance spaces (i.e. a bio-district) and iterative and democratic processes to support on-the-ground change in food systems.

<u>Conclusion</u>

The CO-SFSC project in the Swedish context has led to a number of important governance and practice insights for improving the sustainability of SFSC and local and regional food systems. The primary findings indicate that both municipal supply system and broader food ecosystem interventions are part of integral governance innovations that strengthen connections between practitioners, supply system practices, infrastructures, policies and even the biophysical landscapes and features of a food system in a specific local or regional context. Strengthening these diverse connections between supply systems, food ecosystems and food practitioners is key to the co-creation of sustainable SFSC in Sweden. Our main recommendations for

achieving this are: 1) improving alignment between vertical (local/regional, national, transnational) governance mechanisms to support the work of local governance actors in strengthen SFSC and broader regional food ecosystems, 2) introducing additional policy support for the ongoing development of novel territorial governance configurations, such as bio-districts, and 3) paying greater attention to and catering for the diverse practical realities of everyday food practitioners during change processes in local and regional food systems.

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