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Ghent's sustainable food strategy

Cooperative action transforms local urban food system

Ghent has capitalised on political will, citizen support and a growing global knowledge base to develop a local sustainable food strategy. Its approach is not only helping to achieve ecological and social progress throughout the food chain, it is also encouraging Council departments to consider food issues in policy making for the first time.

Ghent recognised that as part of its commitment to CO2 emission targets and sustainable development, local food systems needed to become a policy priority. It was also aware that consumers, increasingly disconnected from the source of their food, were spontaneously initiating action themselves. The challenge was to understand the city's role in the shift to the kind of sustainable production and consumption models needed to build an inclusive, resilient and fair local food system.

Having gained political validation for its plans in local elections, Ghent launched a comprehensive food policy, *Gent en Garde*, in 2013. Its goal was to reduce the negative environmental impact of each link in the food chain and to make the system more sustainable. A Food Policy Council was set up with 25 members from agriculture, associations, knowledge institutions and commerce to promote and help realise the city's vision by acting as a sounding board, making project recommendations and proposing new ideas.



The city council acts as a unique meeting point for everything happening on sustainable food in the city, which includes our own initiatives as well as the activities citizens initiate that work towards the same goals.

Katrien Verbeke, city of Ghent

Best practices

As an active member of the Food Smart Cities for Development project, Ghent partnered with nine European cities to learn more about how to bring about change. The city also signed up to the Urban Food Policy Pact and initiated an international seminar on local urban food policies which made recommendations and highlighted good practices. There was inspiration too from the success of Ghent's own Thursday Veggie Day project first launched in 2009 and from cities like Bristol and Toronto, who had taken a lead in the field.

cities in action

July 2017

where: Ghent, Belgium
what: participation
when: 2013 - ongoing

Armed with new insights and ideas, in early 2016 a core team from the Food Policy Council refined the policy's strategic goals and translated them into operational goals. The Council sits at the heart of these goals, working with local producers, traders, consumers and other stakeholders to strengthen and broaden existing initiatives and stimulate and launch innovative pilot projects. Projects in line with five overarching objectives: a shorter, more visible food chain, more sustainable food production and consumption, more social added-value food initiatives, reduced food waste and optimum reuse of food waste.



We are working to help our catering team serve more sustainable food in a more sustainable way and are very grateful that a lot of sustainability knowledge comes our way from the city. We have made a breakthrough by introducing veggie days and started work on sustainable tenders.



David van der Ha,
sustainability manager, Ghent University



Success factors

When it comes to quantifying the achievements of these projects, it is easier for some than others. It's known, for example, that Foodsavers distributes four tonnes of food leftovers a week. That Thursday Veggie Day has led to Ghent having more vegetarian restaurants per capita than any other European city. And that a 'Nothing Being Wasted' Festival focused on tackling food waste reached 10,000 people. The next step, currently being planned, is to measure the impact of all projects and create an indicator framework for the whole policy.

The city believes its progress owes a lot to political support and an engaged population keen to play its part. It cites other factors too, such as focusing on quick wins for the first few years to get the issues on the table and then making the switch to a more structured approach aimed at changing the system. Small-scale, project-by-project marketing has kept things simple and costs down. In terms of funding, for the core team it's been more about investing their time and building synergies with other departments' priorities.

As the impact of Gent en Garde grows, the expectation is that it is here for the long term. Food is firmly on the policy agenda and the synergies with poverty, education and agriculture highlighted by the policy's implementation serve to stress its importance. The fact that the city has been invited to give a presentation at the World Health Organisation on food sustainability, and not only the health aspects of food, suggests that this is the issue whose time has come on the world's agenda.

Purposeful projects

By listening to stakeholders and coordinating action, and creating a website providing advice and inspiring action, the Council has enabled a wealth of projects initiated by both citizens and the city to spring up. These include city-centre pig rearing, a café serving only local produce and a leftover box scheme for restaurant diners. The city itself provides support where there is a clear need, as with a project to give children an insight into food production through the creation of school vegetable gardens.

One of the most significant projects, Foodsavers, which redistributes leftover food, manages to achieve three goals in one. As well as saving food from being wasted, it trains the long-term unemployed, enabling them to access the labour market, and brings healthy food to people in poverty. It might have taken years of preparation, getting organisations on board, drawing up contracts and developing the logistics platform, but it is serving as a superb example of how food projects can tackle different needs - and touch different Council departments.

