



Territorialising knowledge-policy interfaces: Lessons from urban food governance spaces

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ABSTRACT

There has been increased academic attention on enhancing the effectiveness of knowledge-policy interfaces at the international level for urgent food systems transformation. However, previous literature signals that actions to improve science, policy, and society relations occur at multiple scales and often through informal avenues. This paper examines the potential role of multi-actor urban food governance spaces in developing more inclusive and territorialised knowledge-policy interfaces; a subject rarely investigated in the literature. To do so, the study proposes a three-dimensional analytical framework that acknowledges their place-based and networked nature. This framework is applied in València and Barcelona, focusing on the knowledge practices within multi-actor urban food governance spaces and their interrelations with the politics of evidence-informed policymaking. The results illustrate that such spaces function as a form of informal knowledge-policy interfaces that promote local and multi-scalar collective learning and knowledge co-production. However, whether knowledge from such spaces becomes a key part of policymaking grapples with issues of limited administrative capacities, scarce data, and lack of political prioritisation of food in the municipal agenda. As such, there is a need for increased efforts to link global, national, and local processes to build on existing infrastructures at different scales, such as by developing translocal knowledge-policy interfaces. This study not only contributes to progress in the field of food. It also offers insights to enhance science-policy-society relations more broadly, illustrating the need to acknowledge the effectiveness of knowledge-policy interfaces as a function of the broader actings of contested place-based and governance dynamics.

1. Introduction

Hundreds of cities across the globe have developed urban food policies to foster more sustainable food systems, as showcased by the success of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP) (Candel, 2020).¹ The participatory character of urban food policies, particularly urban food strategies and related multi-actor urban food governance spaces, has raised awareness of their potential role in fostering knowledge co-production and enhanced recognition of more plural forms of knowledge (Moragues-Faus, 2020). However, as issues in monitoring their impact persist, international initiatives have emerged to propose

tools to measure progress in urban food policies alongside local evidence generation (Moragues-Faus and Marceau, 2019). These efforts are usually rooted in evidence-informed policymaking principles to enhance effective decision-making through transparent and appropriate information and knowledge (Head, 2016).

Nevertheless, as international processes such as the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) highlight, evidence-informed policymaking is filled with challenges, including knowledge legitimacy conflicts, influenced by the current global power-laden and unequal food governance landscape (Canfield et al., 2021). Food policymaking, rooted in political negotiation, contends with evidence politicisation given the influence of

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¹ The MUFPP is a policy initiative, specifically an international agreement, where cities commit to adopt policy initiatives along the categories of: Governance, Sustainable Diets and Nutrition, Social and Economic Equity, Food Production, Food Supply and Distribution Food Waste. It is a result of a participatory process among 46 cities during the Universal Exhibition "Expo Milan 2015" Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life with guidance of international experts (MUFPP, 2024).

powerful interest groups (Isakson et al., 2023). Despite advancements in understanding these dynamics at the international and national levels (Turnhout et al., 2021), empirically grounded reflections on the role of knowledge and evidence in food policymaking at the local scale are mainly absent. In particular, there is limited in-depth investigation of how existing multi-actor urban food governance spaces devise complex interactions between science, society, and policy; and how this relates to the politics of evidence-informed policymaking. As hundreds of urban food governance spaces expand across the globe, investigating their role and limitations as territorialised knowledge-policy interfaces is relevant to progress further a networked multi-scalar and multi-actor science-policy-society agenda.

To address this research gap, this study has two objectives: (1) to analyse the complex knowledge production and use processes within multi-actor urban food governance spaces, and (2) to understand how broader place-based urban food governance dynamics and the politics of evidence uptake in urban food policymaking mediate these processes. Drawing on literature from food scholarship, science and technology studies (STS), and human geography, the paper develops an analytical framework centred on the concept of *knowledge-policy interface* (Zerbian et al., 2023). This concept helps characterise the diverse actors, extending beyond academia and policymakers, and the power-laden relations involved in producing and using knowledge for policy action as a function of food systems governance. It supports identifying how knowledge (both explicit and implicit) enters urban food policymaking and what limits its integration, including the socio-political, normative, and contextual influences that govern knowledge processes.

This innovative conceptual framework is applied to the cities of Barcelona and València. Both cities constitute insightful case studies due to the development of spaces for participatory decision-making and knowledge co-production activities within urban food policy processes, as well as their recognition as international exemplars for sustainable urban food systems. They were both named World Capitals of Sustainable Food and hosted the MUFFPP Annual Forum, gaining heightened global visibility and academic attention (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021a; Vizcaíno Estevan and Vizcaíno Estevan, 2021).

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. First, we present the analytical framework for the study, introducing the emerging concept of knowledge-policy interfaces. Section 3 describes the paper's methodology, and Section 4 introduces the case studies. Section 5 then discusses the results in the light of the analytical framework proposed. We conclude by highlighting how the potential of multi-actor urban food governance spaces as territorialised knowledge-policy interfaces is deeply influenced by the prevailing policy and institutional landscape within which they operate, the specificity of urban food policymaking, translocal interactions, and the types of actors involved in such spaces.

2. Embracing a networked and place-based conceptualisation of knowledge-policy interfaces

Recent food systems literature has questioned the hierarchisation of knowledge in evidence-informed policymaking, in which academia is favoured as the primary evidence source (Singh et al., 2021), aligning with shifts in sustainability science and related fields that have redefined science-policy relations (Maas et al., 2022). Initial conceptions – usually referred to in the context of science-policy interfaces, embraced a linear model, emphasising policy effectiveness and efficiency through transparent knowledge governed by scientific values like credibility, reliability, and validity (Turnhout et al., 2014). Science and policy were seen as separate domains, characterised by the unidirectional communication of evidence - 'science push' (Sokolovska et al., 2019). In this context, a particular focus has been on enhancing boundary work and organisations to bridge this gap, focusing on processes and institutions that facilitate and manage knowledge flows between science and policy (Machen, 2018). Recognising the problematic separation of science and policy as 'purified', distinct units (Wiegleb and Bruns, 2023), there has

been a shift towards co-produced alternatives with a systems-based approach, attending to plural knowledge forms (Pallett and Chilvers, 2015). These alternative models recognise the complex, unstructured and hybrid nature of science, policy, and societal relations (Toukan, 2021).

However, much of this literature focused on the academic sector's role in these co-produced alternatives (Maas et al., 2022). To respond to this, the concept of 'knowledge-policy interfaces' highlights the bidirectional, as well as contested, interactions between knowledge and policy (Turnhout et al., 2021; Zerbian et al., 2023). Knowledge is considered here as the interpretation of information, anchored in practices, beliefs, and discourses and influenced by the governance of specific societal domains, such as food systems² (Zerbian et al., 2023). This includes codified knowledge, such as scientific evidence, and tacit forms, such as technical or experiential knowledge (Edwards et al., 2023). This perspective aids the identification of formal (calls for studies, research funding, expert working groups, impact assessments) and informal (relationships between knowledge producers and policymakers, ad hoc inclusion of knowledge in policymaking, conferences, and workshops) spaces of interaction between knowledge and policy (Dupont et al., 2023; Juhola et al., 2024). It also stresses the need to recognise the role of diverse actors involved in these processes, including CSOs, academic institutions, think tanks, and the industry, whose relationships are shaped by diverse power dynamics within specific societal domains.

In the context of food systems, this networked approach relates to findings of recent research that sheds light on the diversity of formal and informal spaces in which knowledge is introduced into urban food policy (Moragues-Faus, 2020). For example, Vara-Sánchez et al. (2021) identified that academics and CSOs act as informal advisors and consultants to politicians and technical staff of local authorities due to the diversity of informal collaborations that permeate urban food policymaking. Indeed, multi-actor urban food governance spaces integrate not only more or less formalised spaces, such as food policy councils, partnerships, or platforms and the participatory processes for urban food strategies' development (Moragues-Faus and Morgan, 2015). They also incorporate the heterogeneous interactions between a plurality of actors that arise from the development, implementation, and evaluation of urban food policies (López-García and de Molina, 2020). These dynamics can result in the emergence of various knowledge-policy interfaces, which have yet to be examined.

Nevertheless, STS literature has increasingly demonstrated that attention to the power-laden and networked interactions of actors involved in knowledge-policy interfaces is insufficient to understand the politics of evidence-informed policymaking (Jasanoff, 2004; Wyborn et al., 2019). These scholars argue that while knowledge can be introduced in a variety of ways into policymaking, whether this knowledge becomes an integral part of it is subject to the culturally and socio-political situated *knowledge* practices at play, including knowledge generation, sharing, and utilisation (Machen, 2018; Meehan et al., 2018; Wyborn, 2015). Studies have found that policymakers and citizens are not passive recipients of knowledge, but that knowledge is accepted based on complex judgements rather than simple acceptance of evidence (Young et al., 2016). It also involves diverse expectations of evidence-informed policymaking, as well as different understandings of what counts as legitimate expertise and knowledge (van Kerkhoff and Lebel, 2015; van Kerkhoff and Pilbeam, 2017). This perspective emphasises the conflicts between competing epistemologies in knowledge practices, conceptualising science and knowledge as a cultural space in itself and infused with issues of social power (Young et al., 2016). For example, Turnhout et al. (2014) describe how a technocratic discourse

² Food systems governance refers to the diverse decision-making processes and interactions between multiple actors that shape the dynamics of food systems (Yap, 2022; Zerbian and De Luis Romero, 2021).

Table 1

Knowledge-policy interfaces from a networked and place-based perspective.

Dimension	Analytical questions
<i>Characteristics of knowledge-policy interfaces:</i> formal and informal spaces and processes of interaction and engagement for producing, translating, and applying evidence and information for policymaking.	• How do multi-actor urban food governance spaces create spaces that foster interactions between science, policy, and society? • What are their characteristics? • How do these spaces help reconcile different forms of knowledge?
<i>Networked and multi-scalar dynamics:</i> Contingent and relational character of knowledge-policy interfaces, including their translocal dimension and connection to similar local and higher-scale processes.	• How do historical interactions and established relationships among academic, policy, and civil society actors shape the roles and dynamics within knowledge-policy interfaces concerning urban food policy? • In what ways have multi-actor spaces and the evolution of urban food policy processes redefined the roles and relationships between academic, policy, and civil society actors? • How are knowledge-policy interfaces concerning urban food policy interfaces influenced by, and how do they influence, processes at higher scales?
<i>Knowledge and food systems governance:</i> Socio-political and cultural rules, norms, and institutional arrangements concerning knowledge and food	• What is the role of knowledge in urban food policy processes and multi-actor spaces vis-à-vis social, cultural, or political dimensions (mainly urban food governance dynamics)? • What are the capacities of different actors to produce, share, access, and apply new knowledge in this context? • What types of expertise are preferred by knowledge producers and users, and why? • How are different types of knowledge integrated into specific realms of food policymaking?

surrounding the role of evidence within an economic conception of biodiversity can lead to ‘neutral and objective’ knowledge becoming politicised to benefit positivist scientific methods and economic elites in knowledge-policy interfaces.

At the same time, changes in existing systems of policies and institutions can enhance or limit capacities for altering existing relations between science, society, and policymaking (Wyborn et al., 2019). For example, the rise of new municipalism has created a favourable institutional environment for citizen-led decision-making and challenged conventional conceptions of who counts as expert in shaping local policies, emphasising the inclusion of multiple forms of knowledge in these processes (Morley and Morgan, 2021; Sareen and Waagsaether, 2023). In this regard, human geography literature highlights that the constitution and function of knowledge-policy interfaces are subject to localised problem-framings and place-based dynamics mediating how knowledge is perceived, received, and thus utilised and produced (Ley 5/2018, 2018; Moragues-Faus, 2016). This literature views knowledge as a situated practice occurring within specific spatial and temporal dimensions, shaped by multi-scalar dynamics in local and distant places (Porter, 2015). Thus, it is important to acknowledge the spatiality and locality of knowledge-policy interfaces (Chilvers and Evans, 2009; Massey et al., 2009; Pallett and Chilvers, 2015). This focus is also crucial in understanding knowledge-policy interfaces concerning urban food policy. Research highlights that the trans-local dimension of urban food governance, such as national inter-city food networks, constitutes a vehicle for cities’ knowledge sharing and multi-scalar transformations, supporting changes in specific urban food governance contexts through evidence from other territories (Moragues-Faus and Sonnino, 2019).

The emergent concept of knowledge-policy interfaces in food studies integrated with insights from STS and human geography, provides a useful analytical framework to understand knowledge-policy interfaces in the context of (urban) food policy processes and associated multi-actor governance spaces. Table 1 proposes a three-dimensional analytical framework focusing on a networked and place-based conceptualisation of knowledge-policy interfaces to start unpacking the complex and contested relationships between science, policy, and society in the context of food in cities.

3. Methodology

This study follows Yin’s (2009) multiple case study design. Case study research is an empirical, in-depth enquiry for understanding complex social phenomena within real-life contexts, focusing on answering ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions using multiple data sources and

collection methods (Baxter and Jack, 2008). The research took an exploratory approach in which there is no explicit set of outcomes, and comparing cases aids analytical generalisation (Yin, 2018). To do so, the research design employed a deductive-inductive approach, in which the three-dimensional analytical framework presented in Table 1 provided the study’s conceptual structure (Thomas and Myers, 2017), while emergent issues were also considered during data collection and analysis (Kennedy, 2018). Barcelona and València were selected as cases due to their differing stages and backgrounds concerning urban food policymaking, providing theoretical replications – contrasting results (Yin, 2009) – of knowledge-policy interfaces in cities (see Section 4).

The study used multiple sources of evidence to enhance its credibility by validating and cross-checking findings across different data types, as suggested by case study research (Yin, 2009). Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews (15) were conducted online between April and December 2023. The interviews covered a sample of public sector, academia, and civil society actors in each city (Table 2). The sample of participants was purposively selected due to their strategic relevance and perspectives about the cases to answer the analytical framework questions (Fletcher and Plakoyiannaki, 2010). As such, interviews covered the opinions and experiences of participants concerning the use, production, and dissemination of knowledge and evidence in urban food policymaking, particularly urban food strategies’ development, implementation, and evaluation. The interviews also delved into the evolving relationships among academia, civil society,

Table 2

Overview of interview participants.

Case	N°	Sector	Interviewee
Barcelona	B.1	Public sector	Programme Coordinator
	B.2		Former councillor
	B.3	Academia	Researcher - Research Institute
	B.4		Researcher - University
	B.5		Researcher - University
	B.6	Civil society	Representative of NGO
	B.7		Urban food policy consultant
València	V.1	Public sector	Programme Officer
	V.2		Programme Officer
	V.3		Former councillor
	V.4	Academia	Researcher/Consultant - University
	V.5		Researcher - University
	V.6		Researcher - University
	V.7	Civil Society	Representative of NGO
	V.8		Representative of NGO

and the public sector resulting from these processes.

Document analysis complemented the semi-structured interview data, providing context and more in-depth knowledge about the use and production of knowledge in each case (Prior, 2012). Documents included strategic or action plans and policy documents, such as the urban food strategy of each city or policies leading up to their development, and summary/general conclusion documents of participatory events, processes, and spaces related to each urban food strategy that were publicly available (Table 3). Interview participants were also asked to suggest other documents that they thought would aid the understanding of the cases.

Participant observation involved three co-authors, each with distinct roles. One co-author advised on methodological aspects of Barcelona's urban food strategy and facilitated projects in València, mainly focusing on engaging local farmers in urban food governance. Another co-author held advisory positions in both cities, contributing to designing participatory processes for urban food strategies. Their involvement included membership in advisory councils, document development for sustainable food initiatives, and analysing Barcelona's food system. Additionally, another co-author actively participated in València's urban food strategy, representing the academic sector in initial participatory sessions, and conducting research on public food procurement, and more recently as part of the public sector following a new role in a public institution attached to València's City Council. Their reflections and conclusions were shared and discussed within the study's research team.

Guided by the three-dimensional analytical framework for knowledge-policy interfaces, the data collected was coded using the Atlas.ti software. Initial codes for each case were subsequently aggregated into themes related to each framework dimension. The findings of each case were then analysed through cross-case synthesis. Cross-case synthesis identifies common patterns and trends across the analysed cases by comparing and contrasting findings, generating insights that transcend individual cases (Stake, 2005). The conclusion then highlights how the results from this process enhance understanding of knowledge-policy interfaces for food systems change in cities.

4. Case descriptions

4.1. Valencia

València, with a population of 807,693 inhabitants in 2023, is Spain's fourth-largest city and a prominent Mediterranean global trade hub (Puerto de València, 2024), as well as a global destination for summer and gastronomy tourism (Generalitat Valenciana, 2021). While irrigated agricultural land has reduced from a historical peak of 15,000 to 5,000 ha, València's agricultural territory is intertwined with 'l'Horta de València', encompassing 44 municipalities and more than 12,000 ha of irrigated crops (Universitat de València, 2013). In 2021, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) recognised l'Horta de València as a Global Important Agricultural Heritage System for its 'historical waterscape' (FAO, 2021). Initially advocated by the 'Per l'Horta' civic collective, a 2012 Popular Legislative Initiative presented in the Valencia Region Parliament culminated in the approval of the 'Law for l'Horta de València' in 2018 (Ley 5/2018, 2018). This legislation safeguards agricultural land use while promoting a socio-ecological transition in l'Horta de València.

Commitment to engage with urban food policymaking has been driven by the City Council, but also as a reaction to the demands of organised civil society in the last decades that advocate for a more sustainable and fairer food system in València. After a profound shift in the municipal government in 2015, València was one of the pioneering cities to sign the MUFPP in 2015. This led to the creation of the municipal Department for Agriculture, Orchard, and Villages (Agricultura, Horta i Pobles de València), and displayed the first strategic document in 2016 (PAIPATA- Municipal, Integral Action Plan for the Promotion of the Agricultural Activity and Territory). In 2017, València was selected as the World Capital of Sustainable Food for hosting the III MUFPP World Forum. The 'Red de Municipios por la Agroecología (RMAe)' [Network of Municipalities for Agroecology] was presented in the city's events organised following this designation. The RMAe is a Spanish intercity network serving as a template for inter-city knowledge exchange, mainly through working groups with members of academic, public, and civil society sectors, offering technical advice and toolkits for specific policy actions and support to implement research projects across the national and European contexts.

Another result of this designation included the city of València

Table 3
Documents included in the analysis.

Case	Documents	Date
Barcelona	Barcelona Demà. Carta Alimentaria de la Regió Metropolitana de Barcelona [Food Charter of the Metropolitan Region of Barcelona]	2021
	MUFPP. Barcelona Challenge Good Food and Climate. Executive Summary. Barcelona World Sustainable Food Capital 2021. 7 th MUFPP Global Forum.	2021
	Ajuntament de Barcelona. Las políticas alimentarias del Ayuntamiento de Barcelona [The food policies of the Barcelona City Council]	2021
	Ajuntament de Barcelona. Mesura de govern per una alimentació sostenible [Government measure for sustainable nutrition]	2021
	Moragues-Faus, A. L'Alimentació Sostenible: manual per a ciutats [Sustainable Food: Manual for Cities]	2022
	Ajuntament de Barcelona. ¿Cómo se alimenta Barcelona? Diagnóstico del sistema alimentario de Barcelona. Resumen ejecutivo [How does Barcelona feed itself? Diagnosis of the food system of Barcelona. Executive summary]	2022
	Ajuntament de Barcelona. Estratègia d'Alimentació Saludable i Sostenible Barcelona 2030 [Healthy and Sustainable Food Strategy Barcelona 2030]	2022
	MUFPP. The Barcelona Challenge Good Food and Climate. One Year After Report	2022
	Moragues-Faus, A. Caminando hacia un consejo alimentario en Valencia [Walking towards a food policy council in Valencia]	2016
	Ajuntament de València. Jornada de participació: Governança local i polítiques alimàries [Participatory session: Local food governance and policy]	2016
València	CALM. III Jornada de participació ciutadana del Consell Alimentari Municipal [III Citizen participatory session of the Municipal Food Council]	2016
	Plataforma per la Sobirania Alimentària del País Valencià. Manual de Obradores Compartidos. Una herramienta de dinamización socioeconómica del territorio [Shared Food Transformation Hubs Manual. A tool for socio-economic revitalisation of the territory]	2018
	Ajuntament de València. La Estratègia Agroalimentària València 2018–2025 [The València Agri-food Strategy 2018–2025]	2018
	CALM. Recomendaciones para la licitación de comedores escolares con criterio de sostenibilidad - hecho por sociedad civil [Recommendations for the school public food procurement with sustainability criteria]	2020
	Ajuntament de València. Una aproximació a les polítiques agroalimentàries locals des de l'economia feminista. La revisió de l'Estratègia Agroalimentària Municipal [An approach to agri-food policies from a feminist economics perspective. Review of the municipal agri-food strategy for 2020]	2020
	Fundació Assut. Informe d'impacte de gènere de l'estratègia agroalimentària de València 2025 [Gender impact report of the agri-food strategy of Valencia 2025]	2020
	Mundubat. Accés a la Terra i Zona Metropolitana de València: Ferramentes i Propostes [Access to the Land and Metropolitan Area of Valencia: Tools and Proposals]	2021
	Càtedra Tierra Ciudadana-CTC. Manual de Seguimiento y Evaluación de la Estratègia Agroalimentària de València 2025 [Monitoring and Evaluation Manual for the Agri-food Strategy of Valencia 2025]	2021
	Ajuntament de València. APROFITTA VALÈNCIA Generació d'un model d'aprofitament alimentari a València i l'Horta [APROFITTA VALÈNCIA Generation of a food re-utilisation model in Valencia and the Orchard]	2021

Table 4
Summary of findings.

	València	Barcelona
Characteristics of knowledge-policy interfaces	Focalised efforts on setting up the CALM prior to strategy development through leveraging existing science-policy-society relations: - Documents commissioned to academic experts to propose fundamental principles of food policy councils based on previous academic literature and international experiences (Moragues-Faus, 2016). - Participatory sessions (3) to define CALM's structure, principles, and functions using guiding documents developed by academia and CSOs. - Use of previous strategic diagnostics (public purchase and short food supply channels) to guide first thematic Working Groups of CALM. Multi-actor spaces to guide strategy development with high involvement of CSOs: - Motor group including: The municipal Department of Agriculture, Orchard and Villages department, 2 CSOs, and the Càtedra Terra Ciudadana (CTC), a research group at the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV). Participatory phases to define urban food strategy: - I: Participatory diagnostic of urban food system building on previous research projects and reports, as well as conducting workshops and interviews –led by the Agriculture, Orchard and Villages department. - II: Writing up a strategic document synthesising ongoing policy actions and multi-actor interventions, as well as findings of participatory diagnostic, to propose strategy's content – led by the motor group. - III: Citizen consultation and participation using multi-actor spaces already established by the CALM. IV: Approval of strategy proposal in CALM's plenary session.	Increased efforts for science-policy interactions and evidence generation using academic resources prior strategy development: - Local academics serving as expert advisors and developing guiding documents: quantitative diagnosis of urban food and conceptual framework for sustainable food for the city (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022a; Moragues-Faus, 2022). - Wide availability of data generated by local public institutions such as the Barcelona Public Health Agency and the Institut Metrópoli (research centre funded by City Council and Metropolitan Area to conduct studies to inform policymaking) Multi-actor spaces to guide strategy development with high representativeness of local academics (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022b): - A steering committee of about ten members from diverse sectors, such as academia, agroecology, and health, alongside City Council technical staff. - An advisory council providing strategic feedback to legitimise the process. - A technical group of 13 experts, overseeing technical document preparation that served as input for participatory sessions. Participatory sessions to validate generated evidence and technical documents, and conduct a participatory diagnosis (23): - Plenary sessions with representatives of public administration, the private sector, academia, civil society, and the media (3). - Technical group meetings (2). - Sectoral or thematic meetings with stakeholders from public administration, the private sector, academia, civil society, and the media proposed by the steering committee, technical group, and advisory council (8). - Feedback from the general public (6 open sessions plus online consultation). Earlier efforts for building multi-actor and multi-level collaborations supporting spaces for knowledge co-production and collective learning: - Signature of MUFPP and Food Policy Boost Strategy 2016–2019 led to first dynamics of transversal work within City Council. - Metropolitan Region Food Charter (CARM) developed through multi-actor sessions with 100 regional entities and municipalities under the [Strategic Metropolitan Plan of Barcelona [Plan Estratégico Metropolitano de Barcelona (PEMB)] (Barcelona Demà, 2021). - Agropolis installed in 2019 – a municipality-supported space for community co-creation, uniting entities focused on agroecology and food sovereignty and facilitating public grants. It includes actors, such as the Institut Metrópoli and Espigoladors. Barcelona World Capital of Sustainable Food 2021 project as a catalyst for building science-policy-society relations: - Sustainable Food Citizen Week, including awareness raising events, such as for the city's gastronomic heritage, food loss and waste, and rural-urban dynamics, led by CSOs, public bodies, and the academic sector. - Science Week, including workshops and conferences for translating scientific knowledge. - Development of guiding documents by the City Council for joint multi-actor: "The food policies of the Barcelona City Council" "Government measure for sustainable nutrition" (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021b, 2021c). VII Forum of the MUFPP promoted science-policy-society relations with multi-scalar impact: - Launch of the 'Barcelona Challenge for Good Food and Climate' elaboration, aligning with the C40 Good Food Declaration 2019 by MUFPP's Technical Secretariat, RMAE, among other actors (MUFPP, 2021). Hybridity of academic-public roles: - Coordinator of the strategy development process and the World Sustainable Food Capital project, formerly a technical officer in the City Council), has a scholar background in socio-ecological systems. Evidence, particularly academic and quantitative, as a means for supporting narratives rather than informing action: - The practical applicability of Barcelona Challenge is contested. - Perceived fragmentation of academic efforts to inform policy, as well as lacking policy-focused view. Monitoring and measuring are not seen as a priority for urban food policymaking: - No dedicated department to food policy and limited competences. - Determining factor for the success of urban food policies is perceived to be political commitment.
Networked and multi-scalar dynamics	Previous local and multi-scalar science-civil society relations around agroecology and food sovereignty crucial for CALM's development and setting priorities: - PAR and participatory diagnostics of specific food system's challenges. - Support Per l'Horta's Popular Legislative Initiative to protect agricultural land at l'Horta de València from further urbanisation, formally presented in 2012 after a years-long process of social mobilisation. "Charter for Food Sovereignty from Our Municipalities", developed in 2014 during the International Congress of Social and Solidarity Economy (Economia solidaria, 2014). València World Capital of Sustainable Food 2017 designation led to three events to strengthen existing and multi-scalar science-policy-society with a different sectoral focus: - Academia: Congress "Dialogues on Nutrition and Sustainable Food Systems" hosted at the UPV. - Civil Society: "Civil society, food, and sustainable cities Valencia" (Social Summit) co-organised by public and civil society entities, for sharing national experiences. - Public administration: III Forum of the MUFPP. CALM has supported the networked and translocal generation of knowledge, particularly diagnostics of specific topics of relevance using quantitative and qualitative evidence, primarily conducted by CSOs: "APROFITA VALÈNCIA Generation of a food re-utilisation model in Valencia and the Orchard" (Ajuntament de València, 2021). "Shared Food Transformation Hubs Manual. A tool for the socio-economic revitalisation of the territory" (Plataforma per la Sobirania Alimentària del País Valencià, 2018) - Mans a l'Horta project: A project to develop specific strategies to promote agroecological transitions with professional conventional farmers working within the municipal boundaries of València, Hybridity of academic-public-society roles: - Many individuals part of CSOs have an academic background - Research-activists involved in facilitating multi-actor governance spaces	Limited integration of academic knowledge and quantitative evidence for policy action: - Immediacy of solutions and policy action due to limited political commitment. - Tasks assigned to CTC limits their capacity to produce knowledge to inform policy. - Scientific research perceived as not communicated efficiently to drive action. - Science and policy viewed as separate domains with distinct roles.
Knowledge systems and governance		

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Table 4 (continued)

València	Barcelona
Distinct approaches between food policy and more data-driven policies, such as energy for using evidence: • Food perceived as different from other sectors due to its multidisciplinary nature. • Closer connections to CTC and local agroecological movement, specialised in PAR approaches. • Lack of policy coordination and coherence, as well as connection to higher level policies. • Limited funding for social innovation and integration of food in social sciences in local universities. • Lack of coherence in funding for policy implementation, based on projects led by CSOs and City Council Monitoring urban food strategy's progress is challenging, despite efforts to do so: • Monitoring framework and evaluation elaborated by CTC (Cátedra Tierra Ciudadana-CTC, 2021), proposing 31 indicators based on RMAe and MUFPP has yet to be revised and implemented. • Lack of reliable city-level data. • Strategy's ambitious scope and comprehensiveness limits measuring.	• Limited availability of reliable data at the city-level to assess urban food systems. • Commitments instead of benchmarking objectives as part of the urban food strategy to avoid binding character. Preference of technical and tacit knowledge and expertise, as well as activity-based and input indicators, in food policy compared to other sectors due to perceived: • Food system complexity. • Prioritisation in the municipality's agenda – connection to higher level policies. • Lack of unifying thematic meeting point. Limited knowledge within the City Council regarding food policy due to a short trajectory.

signing an agreement with the FAO to establish the World Centre for Sustainable Food of València (CEMAS), funded with public resources. In 2018, the Local Municipal Food Council (CALM) was also formally created after a comprehensive participatory process, which approved València's urban food strategy – ‘The Agri-food policy València 2025’ ([Ajuntament de València, 2018](#)). With the change in the political leadership at the municipal level in Spain in 2023, the continuity of these processes is currently uncertain.

4.2. Barcelona

Barcelona, with a population of 1,655,956 inhabitants, is one of Europe's most densely populated cities, with 16,339 people per square kilometres ([Instituto de Estadística de Cataluña, 2024](#)). It is also one of the most visited cities in Europe, with over 15 million visitors in 2024 ([Observatori del Turisme, 2024](#)). It is home to major distribution infrastructures, with Mercabarna being the leading wholesale market for fruits, vegetables, and fish in Europe ([Mercabarna, 2020](#)). Its Metropolitan Area includes different agricultural areas in which agri-food production is protected and socio-ecological transitions are promoted (among others: Parc Agrari Baix Llobregat, Espai Rural Gallecs, and Natural Parc Collserola). The city is also the host of four high ranked public universities in Spain, including the leading Spanish university, Universitat de Barcelona (UB). In this context, Catalonia is the third European Union region to attract the most European funding for research and innovation ([Catalonia Trade & Investment, 2024](#)).

The trajectory for urban food policy began in 2015 with the city's commitment to the MUFPP. However, a pivotal moment occurred in 2021 when Barcelona was selected as the World Sustainable Food Capital. This designation was treated as a project to raise food as a public concern in the city in conjunction with hosting the VII MUFPP World Forum. To coordinate this strategic project, a specific office was established, involving collaboration between the City Council and the Plan Estratégico Metropolitano de Barcelona (PEMB) [Strategic Metropolitan Plan of Barcelona]. The PEMB is a private non-profit association, promoted by the City Council and the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (AMB). One of the final activities encompassed under the World Sustainable Food Capital project was the development of Barcelona's Healthy and Sustainable Food Strategy 2030 (EASSB2030). After a year of participatory workshops and consultations, the EASSB2030 was presented in November 2022 as an eight-year city-wide commitment. In February 2023, a city-region office for sustainable food was established to coordinate efforts across different governance, aiming to harmonise city- and metropolitan-level food policies with the Regional Government's Food Strategic Plan. Many of the projects developed within this governance context are in dialectical collaboration with RMAe working

groups and events.

5. Knowledge-policy interfaces in urban food policy processes in Valencia and Barcelona

In accordance with the three-dimensional analytical framework that accentuates a networked and place-based conceptualisation of knowledge-policy interfaces, [Table 4](#) provides a summary of critical elements concerning its dimensions in each case.

The ensuing subsections delineate the cross-case synthesis concerning the three dimensions of the analytical framework. While we delineate the outcomes separately for analytical clarity, we underscore their interconnected nature in shaping the dynamics of knowledge-policy interfaces in urban contexts, particularly concerning food policy and associated multi-actor processes.

5.1. Characteristics of knowledge-policy interfaces in the context of urban food strategies: Pluralism and collective learning

Establishing urban food strategies in both cities has been marked by formal and informal processes corresponding to efforts to bypass a linear model of science-policy interactions. According to representatives from Barcelona City Council, local researchers' active involvement as formal consultants and advisors was deliberately fostered to mend the perceived gap between the local academic and public sectors. This stimulated more localised academic evidence production, eventually feeding into the strategy such as through the urban food system's diagnostic ([Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022a](#)). In València, generating academic evidence to inform the strategy faced more limitations. Interviewees noted that the initial ambition for a comprehensive quantitative diagnostic of the city's food system was redirected due to resource constraints towards building a social infrastructure to foster cross-sector policy actions – the CALM. For this purpose, however, the role of expert academics was also determinant, offering documents, such as the ‘Walking towards a Food Policy Council in Valencia’ ([Moragues-Faus, 2016](#)), later discussed in multi-actor participatory sessions to establish the CALM's structure and priorities ([Ajuntament de València, 2016](#); [CALM, 2016](#)). For interviewees in València, a relevant feature was to enable the exchange of diverse knowledge types through such directed efforts:

“In terms of territory, there is a series of knowledge derived from observation that does not necessarily stem from academic work, which should be recognised and included alongside it, although they haven't been formalised [...] This process allowed for the

development of a proposal that could be collaboratively worked on to establish the CALM” (V.4)

This synergy of academic and less codified knowledge in multi-actor spaces is a shared practice between the cases, unveiling a more informal and indirect form of knowledge-policy interfaces. In line with the growing international recognition of plural knowledge-policy interfaces for food policymaking (Duncan et al., 2022), interviewees of both cities emphasised the importance of validating codified knowledge, such as Barcelona’s diagnosis, through multi-actor deliberation as well as using participatory diagnostics to establish consensus on priorities and actions. Notably, the transparency and reliability of knowledge surrounding urban food strategies is based on transdisciplinary approaches. For example, in València, the initial strategy draft was elaborated first by conducting a participatory diagnosis building on previous research projects and reports developed by CSOs and local researchers, as well as conducting workshops and interviews with relevant stakeholders across the food supply chain. The findings of this exercise were then synthesised by members of the motor group of the strategy and validated in participatory workshops. For interviewees in Barcelona, using such a co-produced approach is a strength:

“Well, I think it served to align positions and to triangulate [...] In the end, you have a document that has a certain coherence and is potentially used by multiple agents. It acts as a unifier at the level of narratives, prioritised data, more legitimised data, and understanding the situation.” (B.5)

This sentiment suggests that the strategy document represents a form of a *boundary object*; ‘plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites’ (Star and Griesemer, 1989, p. 393). It also underscores a relevant feature of urban food policy processes in both cities: creating pluralist spaces that recognise the diversity of roles and expertise that actors in government, civil society, and the private sector bring to the table. Previous food systems literature has coined such spaces as ‘knowledge-governance’ interfaces (Turnhout et al., 2021).

The relevance of such an approach is evident in how efforts to collaboratively produce knowledge for informing both strategies have had explicit and implicit impacts on future mobilisations across policy, private and civil society sectors. The importance of indirect impacts was particularly underscored by interviewees in València. For example, the two initial diagnoses, commissioned by the City Council to local academics and CSOs, aimed to build on available quantitative public data and participatory workshops and interviews. Given limited data availability fragmentation at the city level, interviewees recognised the limitations of these efforts in developing ‘objective’ knowledge that aligns with scientific values of credibility, reliability, and validity. However, one programme officer highlights:

“I do feel that those initial diagnoses that we said, at that time, were worthless [...] did serve a purpose. Now, I meet with those people in workshops, and they say, ‘Remember years ago when we talked about this for the first time? Well, look, we’re already doing something’. It is people who have indeed changed... It was a small thing to start.” (V.2)

This quote highlights what Maas et al. (2020) describe as a *facilitating* repertoire of science-policy practice, or in this case, knowledge-governance practice, in which ‘more-than-knowledge’ is produced and mobilised. As seen in the example, although the outcome is not necessarily recognisable as knowledge in a traditional or formal sense (by being codified), a collective learning and understanding process is still developed. As such, multi-actor urban food governance spaces provide a space for reflection and transformative learning, a characteristic that is called upon in international knowledge-policy interfaces such as the IPBES (Lahsen and Turnhout, 2021).

Interviewees highlighted that this approach not only fortified academic-public sector relationships but also demonstrated more immediate and tangible impacts, such as commitments to creating subsequent alternative models of knowledge-policy interfaces for food systems change. A EASSB2030’s transversal objective —Goal 9— emphasises transdisciplinary research, promoting open-access repositories, citizen science, and integrating civil society and the public sector into research calls (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022b). In València, this is reflected in the City Council funding the Cátedra Tierra Ciudadana (CTC), a research group bridging academic research with local communities and policy hosted at the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV). The CTC served as a knowledge-policy interface to generate evidence through PAR, such as directing doctoral or master theses or conducting research to support CALM’s actions. Such indirect impacts of knowledge-policy processes have also generated complementary resources to implement important actions contained in the cities’ urban food strategies through research or action using national and international funding. As discussed in later sections, however, this approach has had some limitations in València, also influenced by the limited availability of resources to implement food policy initiatives.

5.2. Networked and multi-scalar dynamics: Distinct yet overlapping trajectories and hybrid roles

The effect of distinctive trajectories and events over time concerning the urban food strategies of both cities on knowledge-policy interfaces becomes evident when participants stress the necessity of exploring preceding events leading up to their development (see Table 4). In València, participants attribute the prevalence of tacit knowledge to limited time frames and resource availability compared to Barcelona. València initiated its efforts in 2016, during the early stages of urban food policies in Spain, guided by the MUFPP but constrained by limited financial resources and experience compared to the more developed state for Barcelona in 2021. Therefore, the used evidence relied heavily on the expertise of involved actors, particularly members of the local agroecological movement with a strong presence of CSOs. As noted by Wesselink et al. (2013), expertise encompasses the tacit and experiential knowledge necessary to apply technical knowledge, including academic knowledge. One participant from the civil society sector expressed the benefit of this approach:

“We try to create a kind of blend between scientific and traditional knowledge so as not to leave anything aside. Because I think it is us, the people who have been behind it, who are linked to social movements that advocate for popular knowledge, and we know them, obviously not all of them, but we try to bring them to the forefront as much as possible.” (V.7)

This passage highlights that given the expertise guiding policy-making processes, the source and character of knowledge varies (Young et al., 2016). Indeed, interviewees emphasised drawing from evidence and insights from the Spanish agroecological and food sovereignty movement to inform the strategy in València. This has materialised in the embeddedness of agroecology and food sovereignty in the strategy’s content, with them being two guiding principles (Ajuntament de València, 2018). This situation assimilates other food policy processes in Spain, in which CSOs and academics linked to the agroecological and food sovereignty movement, recognised now as authoritative voices, have been crucial in guiding urban food strategies’ processes, leading to a stronger agroecological approach (Zerbian et al., 2021). Interviewees from Barcelona underscored that the city’s approach differed from this trajectory, which the MUFPP usually accompanies as the primary blueprint:

“Having also reviewed other strategies, I think almost all strategies in Spain are aligned with the MUFPP. In Barcelona, it was a rethink... They didn’t want the starting point of all others, which I might have

done for simplification and comparability. So, it emerged from, I imagine, the initial data collection, the diagnosis, as a different way of organising it...” (B.6)

Compared to other Spanish cases, Barcelona notably emphasises the climate emergency in its strategy and guiding documents, partially influenced by the thematic focus of the VII MUFPP Forum and World Capital of Sustainable Food project (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022b). Respondents acknowledged that the strategy’s distinctive content also resulted from the technical group’s high representativeness of actors from academia and civil society with an increased focus on generating policy-oriented evidence, also present in thematic meetings and plenary sessions. As a result, “one can breathe their influence” (B.6), such as in Goal 9 of the strategy, which emphasises cross-sectoral knowledge co-ordination. The experiences of both cases thus point to considering the non-neutral and contingent nature of knowledge-policy (-governance) interfaces, highlighting the importance of examining the expertise/knowledge vis-à-vis the types of actors informing urban food policymaking, an issue widely debated in environmental policy (Wiegleb and Bruns, 2023).

The cases also showcase the bidirectional multi-scalar dynamics in knowledge and policy, creating a complex geography of knowledge mobilisation across scales, such as drawing from the established trajectory of the United Kingdom’s food policy councils to inform the CALM’s structure (Moragues-Faus, 2016). Conversely, València’s recognition as the World Sustainable Food Capital in 2017 facilitated national inter-city linkages by bringing together stakeholders from the public, civil society, and academic sectors of MUFPP Spanish signatory cities (see Table 4). In Barcelona, the RMAe endorsed the launch of the Barcelona Challenge for Good Food and Climate during the VII MUFPP Forum, which 24 C40 cities have adopted as of 2022. This initiative facilitates international inter-city knowledge exchange by providing a toolkit, co-produced by civil society organisations and city officials, with academically supported metrics to measure the tangible socio-ecological benefits of selected policy actions. Overall, these translocal linkages have increased the capacity of individual local efforts, with both cities using these avenues to support local action. For example, Barcelona is using the expertise and knowledge developed through the RMAe working groups to inform its future monitoring and evaluation framework.

Concerning the networked nature of knowledge-policy interfaces, a key finding from the cross-case analysis is the hybridity of actors. Our data suggests a deviation from traditional perceptions of CSOs as mere knowledge brokers primarily focused on disseminating information and advocacy (Oehmer and Jarren, 2019). In both cities, CSOs are crucial in generating knowledge for urban food policymaking, often through reports from externally funded PAR projects, incorporating various data sources such as secondary data, interviews, focus groups, and best practices (Ajuntament de València, 2020; CALM, 2020; Fundació Assut, 2025; Mundubat, 2021). In València, interviewees mentioned the CALM providing a fertile ground for social projects and experimentation through the work of CSOs – a type of ‘evidence-based learning’ (Dunn et al., 2017), despite being limited in long-term policy changes. A notable aspect of these CSOs is the academic background shared by many individuals who are part of them, diffusing a clear separation between civil society and academic realms.

Indeed, several actors coordinating or participating in urban food policy processes fluctuate between positions at local universities and the public sector or external consultancy and, at the same time, are active in local food movements. This could be related to academics being civil servants due to the public nature of Spanish universities, potentially providing an increased vocation of merging knowledge and public interests. For example, this is translated in the codification of knowledge generated in multi-actor spaces by hybrid academic profiles through the systematisation of experiences, as well as translating information and languages bidirectionally and creating trust between city officers and

CSOs’ activities (López-García et al., 2020; López-García et al., 2021; Vara-Sánchez et al., 2021). This exemplifies the multiplicity of identities that actors have in the assemblage of the domains of science, civil society, and policy, with the categories of knowledge producers and users oversimplifying this complexity (Kettle et al., 2017).

5.3. Knowledge and food systems governance: The uniqueness of urban food policy

Whilst pluralism and a co-production approach was an underlying premise of multi-actor urban food governance spaces in both cities, translating knowledge and evidence, particularly academic and codified, into policy content and action beyond such spaces was perceived as contentious. As seen earlier, efforts have been made to integrate the academic sector in these tasks, a practice also identified in previous literature (Barbour et al., 2022). Yet, interviewees from civil society and the public sector perceived that whilst relevant to measure progress, the outputs of these processes usually lacked a policy-focused view, limiting their applicability. When prompted whether this could be improved by greater bidirectional communication with regards to establishing research objectives and outputs, representatives of the City Councils in both cities emphasised:

“I mean, I shouldn’t have to tell the university, with a school of agronomy and rural studies, what they should study and what they shouldn’t. I mean, is it really the role of an administration to tell the universities what to do?” (V.1)

Such vision reinforces an understanding of science and policy as occupying wholly distinct cultural and physical spaces (Mahony, 2013), despite the co-production approach identified in multi-actor urban food governance spaces. Indeed, interviews underscored academia’s and the public sector’s distinct and, at times, competing objectives – “one involves producing knowledge, and the other involves managing things and reproducing itself” (B.5). This symbolic separation, however, does not directly translate into adopting an information-deficit approach of science-policy relations, in which actors perceive that increased reliable and credible academic knowledge will lead to more effective policies (Maas et al., 2022). Representatives from both City Councils emphasised that such forms of codified knowledge are not necessarily an intrinsic need to guide policy content, but a means to support already established policy directions:

“Well, it has been able to give us some clues for a specific political project, but I believe that the main impact is that it has given us arguments to defend and strengthen our narrative.” (B.2)

This passage offers an initial insight into the political nature of knowledge utilisation in urban food policymaking, akin to what other disciplines term ‘the strategic use of knowledge by policy’ (van Enst et al., 2014). In this regard, respondents from both cities emphasised that while additional evidence and heightened knowledge are relevant, they alone are insufficient to drive policy change; political commitment is also a crucial determinant. In both cities, the inclusion of food in the municipal agenda contrasts with longer-standing political commitments in sectors such as mobility and energy due to their substantial presence in European urban sustainability policies and dedicated municipal departments, resulting in limited financial and personnel resources for food policies. According to interviewees, food has only recently gained political attention, spurred by initiatives such as the MUFPP, with urban food strategies thus strategically aimed at creating a paradigm shift to elevate food as a political priority by aligned policymakers at the local level. Indeed, limited agricultural competences and great dispersion of municipal departments’ actions concerning food has led to “a significant aspect of building public policy from a somewhat disruptive standpoint, opening a path through trial and error” (B.2) in Barcelona; identified also in previous literature (López-García et al., 2019).

In such context, respondents identified that evidence becomes a

priority to inform policy only when driven by higher commitments, such as monitoring Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or climate action European policies, where other sectors have a more substantial local presence. This was accompanied by challenges in quantitative data availability at the city level concerning food systems to measure and monitor urban food strategies' progress. Respondents involved in sustainability assessments across various domains emphasised that this evidence gap in food systems compared to other sectors was also related to the unique nature of food itself:

"In the past, when I used to do urban mobility plans, the focus was on infrastructure [...] about km of constructed roads [...] Now, the focus is more on socio-environmental assessments. When population health entered the debate on mobility, that's when everybody aligned. So, it could be a way to, let's say, question the food system. Yet, the complexity of the evidence and translating that into a language that is understood... The fact that food is very interdisciplinary, the approach can be so different..." (B.3)

"Considering that the object of study is not something like, I don't know, the public bus transportation routes in the city, where optimisation is needed, and in the end, you'll require certain data. Frequencies, stops, [...] you need a primarily technical foundation. But in this case, the food system..." (V.1)

By bringing up this complexity, these informants also show a crucial difference in food compared to the context of knowledge-policy interfaces in other sectors. Notably, technocratic discourses of food are not prevalent across the academic, civic, or public sector actors engaged in urban food policy processes in the analysed cases. This contrasts with the 'scientification' of issues discussed in the context of other, non-food environmental issues (Wesselink et al., 2013), in which the prioritisation of scientific techniques for assessing the environment as a group of discrete and fungible units is prominent (Turnhout et al., 2014; Lahsen and Turnhout, 2021). The perception of food as an inter- and trans-disciplinary subject might be connected to the types of actors engaged in urban food policymaking discussed in Section 5.2. For example, in València, social movements have brought a stronger focus on the socio-political aspects of changing food systems and strengthening socio-political subjects. In both cases, including hybrid actors, such as research-activists, with stronger PAR approaches has also meant that participatory approaches have permeated the development of the cities' urban food strategies (see previous section). One researcher, however, expresses that this is a limitation to ensure longer-lasting policy commitments in the case of València:

"The approach taken in the food strategy has indeed collided with more data-driven policies [...] Knowing a bit about how many foods are being consumed that are local, where we have the main emission expenses, [...] there are no specific studies. [...] For example, in energy, mobility, the smart city, the 15-minute city. All those lines of work of the City Council are very based on numbers. And I think the results are in the response. That is, in energy, in mobility, many more things have been promoted although with a less participatory approach." (V.6)

Nevertheless, academic research and quantitative evidence were recognised as *equally* relevant to supporting action by respondents steering València's urban food strategy (many from the agroecological and food sovereignty movement)—provided they offer practical solutions rather than merely advancing academic interests. Indeed, the limited emphasis on data-driven and scientific evidence was more strongly shaped by the resource constraints resulting from the broader urban and knowledge governance context, where food is yet to become a political priority, than by the complexity or understanding of the food system itself. In València, limited resources for urban food policy have transformed the CTC into a supplementary infrastructure for administrative tasks and supporting CALM's operations. This has hampered

their capacity for knowledge brokering activities as well as prioritising conducting research to guide policy action, whereby "the issue is that sometimes there are not enough resources to conduct scientific studies, as rigorous as we would like, but with participatory work helping gather information" (V.5). In this context, participants from both cities, more prominently in València, note a de-emphasis on prioritising 'robust' and quantitative evidence to inform urban food policy, focusing instead on fostering bottom-up collective action, seen as more effective for achieving short-term, tangible results in such governance landscape. This situation raises a concern regarding how city councils' administrative capacities and structures (influenced by broader political dynamics), such as limited personnel or training, can affect not only the successful implementation of actions (Vara-Sánchez et al., 2021) but also the effectiveness of knowledge-policy interfaces and evidence-informed policymaking.

The 2023 political leadership changes in both cities have heightened these challenges, underscoring the impact of politics on knowledge-policy dynamics. Interviewees from civil society and academia expressed concern over the future of urban food strategies under the new City Council members, noting a reduced prioritisation of food expressed primarily through a rollback in supporting multi-actor spaces, such as the CTC or the CALM. These shifts are expected to negatively affect the co-production process, with several civil society respondents indicating a reluctance to participate in future multi-actor spaces in both cities. Significantly, in the current political climate, most interviewees felt more evidence would have little effect on ensuring the continuity of policy outcomes achieved thus far, as much of this depends on whether the orientation of prior policies aligns with the current prevailing political ideology and prioritisation. In València, for example, respondents highlighted that current political figures' denial of climate change science means that additional data on food systems would likely be dismissed. This underscores the importance of understanding the broader social, cultural, and political norms that influence the dynamics of knowledge-policy interfaces (Ley 5/2018, 2018) and suggests that, in unfavourable socio-political contexts, effective knowledge translation is not enough, and alternative strategies might be necessary. As identified by Zerbán et al. (2023) and mentioned by interviewees, an alternative approach could be using evidence and academic knowledge to amplify and challenge dominant narratives in public discourse through awareness-raising to increase pressure on governments, alongside supporting incremental change through PAR.

6. Conclusion

The study has raised the relevance of differentiating between the processes in which knowledge-policy interfaces may arise from how knowledge is mobilised and eventually integrated into policymaking. It is through the specific combination of both elements that knowledge actually becomes embedded into local government decision-making and actions in specific, context-dependent forms to address urban food systems' challenges.

The comparative analysis reveals that the multi-actor spaces arising from the urban food strategies in both cities have promoted collective learning, transdisciplinary processes, and multi-scalar knowledge co-production. However, the experiences from both cases also highlight the imperative to recognise the contingent and territorialised dimensions of knowledge-policy interfaces, emphasising the importance of examining the aims, positionalities, expertise and viewpoints of stakeholders shaping them. At the same time, follow-up efforts grapple with challenges in evidence-informed policymaking, marked by scarce data and correlated resource constraints. The relatively fragile nature of urban food policies due to limited political commitment compared to other policies and short political cycles leads to immediacy within the analysed City Councils. Implementing concrete actions informed by technical and tacit knowledge is thus prioritised rather than engaging in a more comprehensive process of evidence-informed policy action.

Tensions arise regarding using codified knowledge, such as scientific evidence, in the broader context of urban food policymaking, which is viewed as detached from local realities and not guaranteeing effective policies. These dynamics result in a twofold process. A lack of resources relegates scientific knowledge to supporting pre-defined political decisions. Simultaneously, policy agendas fail to identify scientific knowledge as valuable to inform policymaking and, thus, do not allocate resources for generating dedicated data and knowledge.

Consequently, the study calls for recognising the potential of multi-actor urban food governance spaces as inclusive and plural knowledge-policy interfaces that contrast with the prevalent information-deficit model dominant in policies concerning climate action or international food policies. However, it also raises the need to build on these existing infrastructures to surpass current challenges in urban food policy as it struggles to remain a relevant policy field for city councils, contributing to the persistence of a linear model of science-policy relations.

This study suggests that translocal linkages are a promising avenue for advancing this process. As the comparative analysis demonstrates, existing platforms, such as inter-city national food networks, have the potential to transcend specific contextual boundaries and connect evidence produced at various levels and distant places to local challenges. This multi-scalar knowledge exchange not only enhances the collective capacity for knowledge generation and application but also ensures that policy interventions are locally relevant and informed by diverse perspectives. As such, translocal food knowledge-policy interfaces, grounded in existing local and translocal multi-actor infrastructures and with a clear mandate to build capabilities to navigate the dynamics of evidence-informed policymaking, could potentially support disrupting the traditional linear science-policy model in local contexts. By fostering continuous, iterative multi-actor exchanges of experiences and lessons from diverse contexts, such interface could enable developing alternative strategies that more effectively leverage evidence and knowledge to challenge entrenched political priorities or reinforce the continuity of favourable food policies. This approach would not only elevate local capacities and needs but also promote a more diverse, inclusive, and impactful model of knowledge production, ultimately driving food system transformation at multiple scales.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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