

Article

# Food and Governmentality in the Green City: The Case of German Food Policy Councils

Alena Birnbaum <sup>1,\*</sup> and Petra Lütke <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Landscape Planning and Communication, University of Kassel, Germany

<sup>2</sup> Department of Geography, University of Münster, Germany

\* Corresponding author ([alena.birnbaum@asl.uni-kassel.de](mailto:alena.birnbaum@asl.uni-kassel.de))

Submitted: 28 July 2022 | Accepted: 29 October 2022 | Published: in press

## Abstract

As an essential urban matter, food has always been highly relevant in issues of social and environmental justice. Current debates around food call for a better understanding of the relationship between global and local food production and social and environmental justice. Specifically, discussions on urban greening concepts are considering whether and how social justice and sustainability goals can be achieved. This has become a pressing issue due to a growing awareness of negative effects and social imbalances in the production, consumption, and disposal of food. The article explores the normative foundations and constructions of “good and just food” that are considered appropriate to a sustainable food system and the power techniques related to personal and environmental responsibility that feature in the work of the German food policy councils seeking to initiate a transformation process. Using a governmentality approach based on Foucault, this article seeks to fill gaps in the literature regarding food policy councils and, thereby, contribute to our understanding of the local manifestations of global policy projects that address environmental and social justice in green cities.

## Keywords

food; German Food Policy Councils; governmentality; green city; transformation

## Issue

This article is part of the issue “Social Justice in the Green City” edited by Roberta Cucca (Norwegian University of Life Sciences) and Thomas Thaler (University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences).

© 2023 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

## 1. Introduction

Current trends towards good, healthy, and sustainable food are emerging as a blueprint for ongoing political, public, and academic debates on the consequences and causes of climate change and the associated perception that urgent action is required (German Advisory Council on Global Change, 2011; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2014). In particular, increasing awareness of the negative impacts and social imbalances arising from the agricultural production, processing, consumption, and disposal of food is shaping a variety of discussions, policies, and guidelines that advocate for individual action (Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture, 2020). One way to approach these challenges

is through the relocalisation of food (through policies) at the city and local levels. As suggested by Pothukuchi and Kaufman (1999), food is a “significant urban system” (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999, p. 217) that should be brought (back) to the urban level and, thus, made governable through municipal politics. On this premise, more than 100 cities signed the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (2015) after Expo 2015 in Milan as part of an international agreement to develop a more sustainable urban food system (Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, 2015). At the same time, numerous guidelines, cookbooks, and workshops reflect the enormous importance placed on individual contributions to and responsibility for “climate-friendly shopping, cooking and enjoyment” (Demrovski, 2021, translation by the authors; Pritz, 2018).

Food policy councils (FPCs), first established in the US, could be considered potential agents in relation to food as a political and private matter as outlined in the green city strategies for developing more sustainable cities (e.g., Andersson, 2016; Breuste et al., 2020; Hammelman, 2022; Roberts, 2010). The associated urban food strategies have the potential to bring people from very different socio-economic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds together through shared visions of, for example, developing a sustainable food system or green city (e.g., Moragues et al., 2013, p. 20). Research has shown that the FPCs within the alternative food movement, by opposing the increasing commodification and industrialisation of agricultural systems and presenting alternatives to local food politics, have great potential to influence these transformation processes (Renting et al., 2012, p. 289). On account of their successes, long-standing FPCs in the US, Canada, and the UK have been informal guides for the growing number of FPCs in German cities. Nevertheless, to date, there has been no critical conceptualisation of social (in)justices, responsibilities, or guidance of “environmental subjects” (Agrawal, 2005, p. 178) by FPCs within the alternative food movement (Goodman et al., 2013).

This article explores the underlying power effects of political strategies and the invocation of sustainability-conscious subjects in the work of FPCs based on the following questions: What are the priorities of FPCs in their activism and political work and what are their motivations and objectives? What underlying understandings do FPCs have about what makes a food system sustainable? What ideals underpin the FPCs’ understandings of sustainable food systems and what, if any, contradictions are discernible among them? To what extent do forms of self and environmental responsibility become visible in the FPCs’ conceptions of sustainable food systems? To address these questions, the role of FPCs within the alternative food movement is clarified herein. Foucault’s concept of governmentality (Foucault, 1978, 1982) is then used to facilitate the analysis of the power relations and mechanisms for governing the self in the context of food. Applying this approach to an interpretative analysis of expert interviews with members of five German FPCs provides exemplary insight into their understanding of a sustainable food system and strategies for transforming local food policies. The results show how socio-ecological responsibility is (re-)produced in the transformation processes of the food system spearheaded by FPCs from within the alternative food movement.

## 2. Theoretical Approaches

### 2.1. Food Policy Councils in the Food System and Social Justice

Neoliberal urban regimes have compromised the ability of governments to meet people’s needs regarding food

and people have responded by organising on a local scale. In both Europe and the US, food activists have argued that local solutions resist the injustice that industrial capitalism produces (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005). However, there has also been some frustration with the lack of attention to social justice within the alternative agrifood movement itself. One of the reasons the local level has achieved such prominence in food politics is because of the failure of organic providers to address social justice issues (Guthman, 2008) and a socially just food system is generally considered “one in which power and material resources are shared equitably so that people and communities can meet their needs, and live with security and dignity, now and into the future” (Activist Researcher Consortium, 2004, as cited in Allen, 2010, p. 297). To effectively influence the struggle for social justice, the local food systems must:

- Increase our understanding of the economic, political, and cultural forces that have shaped the current agrifood system;
- Display a willingness to analyse and reflect upon which local food system priorities and activities work toward, rather than against, social justice;
- Establish periodically evaluated criteria for social justice (Allen, 2010, p. 297).

FPCs, organisations dedicated to these goals, have existed for several decades in the US and Canada. The first FPC was formed in 1982 in Knoxville, Tennessee, in response to limited access to healthy food resulting from poor food planning coordination (Harper et al., 2009, p. 17). In the last 10 years, the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future has reported a steady increase in the number of FPCs in the US and Canada and there are now approximately 340 active FPCs registered; 71% of those are active in the county or/and city level (Bassarab et al., 2019, p. 3). Inspired by the activities in the US, the first European FPCs were formed in 2011 in Bristol, UK, while the first two German councils were founded in Berlin and Cologne in 2016. Now, there are almost 30 active councils in Germany, mostly in cities, including some that are still in the process of being founded. The fact that FPCs are a very recent phenomenon in Germany is reflected in Table 1.

In addition, FPCs are currently being founded in Austria, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. While some founding initiatives are being spearheaded by governments and political institutions, the majority of FPCs are being founded through civil society engagement (Netzwerk der Ernährungsräte, n.d.).

Although the term “food council” corresponds to the German *Ernährungsrat*, the more common English-language term “food policy council” is being used in this article to emphasise the political ambitions of the initiatives. Roberts (2010, p. 173) defines the basic concept of FPCs as follows:

**Table 1.** FPCs in Germany.

| City/Region       | Name  | Foundation |
|-------------------|---|------------|
| Aachen            | Ernährungsrat Aachen und Region                   | 2019       |
| Bayreuth          | Ernährungsrat Oberfranken                         | 2021       |
| Berlin            | Ernährungsrat Berlin                              | 2016       |
| Bergisch Gladbach | Ernährungsrat Bergisches Land e.V.                | 2022       |
| Bielefeld         | Ernährungsrat Bielefeld                           | 2018       |
| Bochum            | Ernährungsrat Bochum                              | 2020       |
| Dortmund          | Ernährungsrat Dortmund und Region e.V.            | 2022       |
| Dresden           | Ernährungsrat für Dresden und die Region          | 2017       |
| Düsseldorf        | Ernährungsrat Düsseldorf e.V.                     | 2021       |
| Essen             | Ernährungsrat Essen                               | 2019       |
| Frankfurt am Main | Ernährungsrat Frankfurt                           | 2017       |
| Freiburg          | Ernährungsrat Freiburg & Region e.V.              | 2019       |
| Fürstfeldbruck    | Ernährungsrat für den Landkreis Fürstfeldbruck    | 2018       |
| Gießen            | Ernährungsrat Gießen                              | 2022       |
| Hannover          | Netzwerk Ernährungsrat Hannover und Region e.V.   | 2021       |
| Kiel              | Kieler Ernährungsrat                              | 2018       |
| Köln              | Ernährungsrat für Köln und Umgebung               | 2016       |
| Leipzig           | Ernährungsrat Leipzig                             | 2019       |
| Lüneburg          | Ernährungsrat Lüneburg                            | 2019       |
| Marburg           | Ernährungsrat Marburg                             | 2020       |
| München           | Münchner Ernährungsrat                            | 2018       |
| Münster           | Ernährungsrat Münster                             | 2021       |
| Oldenburg         | Ernährungsrat Oldenburg                           | 2017       |
| Prignitz-Ruppin   | Ernährungsrat Prignitz-Ruppin                     | 2018       |
| Regensburg        | Ernährungsrat Regensburg—Stadt und Land           | 2018       |
| Saarland          | Ernährungsrat Saarland e.V.                       | 2018       |
| Stuttgart         | Ernährungsrat StadtRegion Stuttgart e.V.          | 2021       |
| Tübingen          | Ernährungsrat Region Tübingen und Rottenburg e.V. | 2021       |

Source: Authors' work based on Netzwerk der Ernährungsräte (n.d.).

Food policy councils bring together people engaged in a wide variety of food organizations and activities to share ideas about and help initiate projects that advance community food security and food system sustainability and to develop public understanding that a sustainable and secure food system generates a wide mix of community benefits.

The core aspects of FPCs relate to access to food, hunger reduction, economic and health aspects of nutrition, and other particular socio-ecological criteria (Hodgson, 2019; Stierand, 2016). FPCs aim to develop a network structure through which stakeholders can generate influence and put pressure on the local food system. In turn, one of their significant goals is to establish socially and ecologically oriented agricultural production and processing. This includes, for example, land allocation procedures, community catering, or the establishment and promotion of regional value chains (Hamilton, 2002, p. 146). It is believed that these approaches will enable food system actors to create opportunities for co-determination over the local food supply and contribute solutions to issues related to the food system (Stierand, 2016, p. 314). Underlying understandings of responsible consumption,

self-care, and environmental care consistently emerge as drivers of the transformation process, as do the networks of the relevant and influential actors. The latter is particularly important because alternative food movements like FPCs do not act as autonomous entities detached from complex, powerful social processes. Instead, rationalities, regimes of truth and knowledge, and subjectivation processes are repeatedly (re-)produced (Foucault, 1978, 1982). In the following analysis, the governmentality perspective is used to shed light on the aspects of power relations related to the sustainability goals pursued by FPCs in the food context.

## 2.2. Governmentality and Food

According to Foucault's analysis of power and concept of governmentality, it is possible to uncover power relations that remain hidden from other theoretical approaches, in particular, those that emerge from discursive structures and, therefore, have repressive and productive effects (Doherty, 2007). Foucault's concept of governmentality was first introduced in his lecture series at the Collège de France on "Sécurité, Territoire et Population" ("Security, Territory, and Population,"

1977–1978) and “Naissance de la Biopolitique” (“The Birth of Biopolitics”; 1978–1979). In the lectures, Foucault (1982, p. 790) stated that:

“Government” did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather, it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed....It did not only cover the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection but also modes of action, more or less considered or calculated....To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others.

According to this view, a broader understanding of power is required, one in which power relations are not only seen as a relationship between those who govern and those who are governed as an exclusively state-institutionalised category, but more generally as subtle power relations that occur in all forms of social interactions “from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-galitarian and mobile relations” (Foucault, 1978, p. 94). Hence, power relations are mutable and fluidly “produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 1978, p. 93). Here, Foucault is referring to the compounding moments of power that lead to the formation of governments as a “set of institutions and practices by which people are ‘led’” (Foucault, 1991, p. 176) through the production of knowledge, disciplined by institutions and processes of subjectivation. This directs the attention to practices where people do not obey laws or external constraints, but act on the basis of “the relations between truth, power, and subject without ever reducing each of them to the others” (Foucault, 2011, p. 9). In the context of food, this perspective allows one:

To see nutrition for what it is: a government of food choice which situates the individuals within a field of knowledge for explicit objectives, and, at the same time provides them with a way of constituting themselves as ethical subjects through a decipherment of their pleasures and fulfilments. (Convey, 2006, p. 161)

Recognising the subject’s position in contexts of knowledge and power in such a way allows “the consumer to make new value judgements about the relative desirability of foods [based on] their own knowledge, experience, or perceived imagery” (Renting et al., 2003, p. 398).

The study on ethical consumerism by Barnett et al. (2008, p. 643) underlines the importance of developing individualised strategies for targeting “choosy consumers” by making precise distinctions “between action, identity and subjectivity.” Subjectivation refers to “a form of power which makes individuals subjects” (Foucault, 1982, p. 781; see also Linnemann, 2018, p. 235; Reckwitz, 2017, p. 126; Strüver, 2009, p. 74):

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks [them] by [their] own individuality, attaches [them] to [their] own identity, imposes law of truth in [them] which [they] must recognize and which others have to recognize in [them]. (Foucault, 1982, p. 781, gender inclusion added)

The ongoing process of identity formation as a subject is integrated into forms of power as “technologies of the self” (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). The power-analytical governmentality perspective enables us to include phenomena in the analysis “that have so far been assigned to the realm of individual preferences or free choices” (Füller & Marquardt, 2009, p. 90, translation by the authors; see also Linnemann, 2018, p. 237). In the context of food, in particular, both the material and the symbolic dimensions of governmentality become apparent. Thus, Hälterlein (2015) uses a governmentality perspective to situate eating beyond the fulfilment of basic needs. This allows forms of self-government to be considered as an interplay between subjectivation processes, care of the self, and the rationalities of everyday practices related to food. In turn, this shows which (historical) control mechanisms influence and steer ideas about consumption, associated discourses, institutions, and practices. As a result, it becomes clear how people eat or should eat is strongly influenced by social and environmental norms and cannot be explained by nutritional and physiological principles alone. This study explores the influence of social and environmental norms from a governmentality perspective through interviews with members of the FPCs.

### 3. Methodology

This qualitative research is based on semi-structured interviews with members of selected German FPCs that were conducted between September and November 2021. The sample FPCs for the analysis (FPC1, FPC2, FPC3, FPC4, FPC5a, and FPC5b) were chosen for two primary reasons. First, preference was given to FPCs that have been active for more than two years. However, as FPCs are a new phenomenon in Germany, younger councils were also included in the survey in order to obtain more data. Second, we created a balanced spatial representation of organisations from throughout Germany. In total, seven members of six FPCs were available for an interview. FPC5a and FPC5b refer to two interviewees from the same FPC. A pre-test was carried out with an additional FPC to check the interview guidelines. Most of the chosen interviewees were active board members or spokespeople and were also, often, the only contact listed on the FPCs’ websites. As leaders and administrators in the field, they provided the study with expert perspectives and further contextual information (Bogner & Menz, 2002, pp. 64–70). We have intentionally avoided identifying interviewees through personal characteristics to protect their confidentiality.

The pre-created interview guidelines consisted of thematic blocks with corresponding sub-questions. Initially, the interviews focused on gaining insights into the founding process, the structures, organisation, working methods, and composition of the councils. Subsequently, the arguments and narratives that occur within the food context were investigated through questions about the councils' (self-)understanding and their virulent ideas about how to create a transformation of the food system and associated policies. Finally, modes of food production and consumption were explored through questions about the FPCs' understandings of sustainable and healthy food.

As semi-structured interviews ensure great openness and flexibility, not all pre-formulated or follow-up questions were asked in every interview in accordance with the processual character of the qualitative research method (Mattisek et al., 2013, p. 168). A qualitative content analysis strategy was applied to the edited German transcripts following Mayring (2015) and using the software MAXQDA. The codes and sub-codes were deduced based on an earlier literature analysis and then applied to the supporting and explanatory statements extracted from the transcripts. The interviews and analyses were conducted by one researcher, who was supervised by a second throughout the process. All quotes from the interviews used in the article have been translated into English by the authors. In order to maintain confidentiality and facilitate coding and analysis, each FPC was assigned a number from one to five. It should be noted that the transferability of the results is limited due to the short research period and the small number of interviews. Nevertheless, a qualitative research method based on fewer data has provided profound insight into the inner structures, diverse content, and working methods of the FPCs. Furthermore, although the validity of qualitative research design has its limitations, a study designed to interpret and understand does not need to be statistically representative or provide as many case studies as possible. Such a study focuses, instead, on identifying and understanding the subjective patterns of the behaviour and perceptions of the interviewees.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Motivations, Organisational Substructures, and Political Agendas of Food Policy Councils

The signing of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact 2015 highlighted the recognition of the important role cities have to play in shaping a sustainable and just food system. However, from the FPCs' perspective, the political structures, regional value chains, and active city communities required to effectively implement changes that move the food system towards greater sustainability are lacking (Wiskerke, 2009, pp. 375–376). Networking with urban policymakers, other actors within the food system (e.g., farmers, restaurant owners, and retailers),

and initiatives from the alternative food movement (e.g., food sharing, community supported agriculture) are key elements of the FPCs' work and are seen as essential for the successful transformation of the food system (FPCs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5a, and 5b). These networking structures have already proven useful during the funding process. Furthermore, the majority of FPC members have the professional or technical expertise and prior knowledge within the food context (e.g., from science, food production, or retail) needed to facilitate and motivate engagement: "I have been active in climate protection for many years, especially in areas related to agriculture and agricultural transformation, and you can see how little has changed in the last twenty years" (FPC2). In this context, the importance of explicit knowledge, the resulting sense of individual responsibility, and the increasing importance placed on "governance-beyond-the-state" (Swyngedouw, 2005) have become evident. Thus, the idea driving the formation of FPC is that if the transformation of the food system "does not come from the city, then...we as civil society have to take over" (FPC1). A study by Schiff (2008) based on interviews with 13 FPCs in the US and Canada also concluded that the councils' self-image "relates strongly to that of acting as a citizen voice and facilitator for the advancement of public interest" (Schiff, 2008, p. 215).

This statement is underlined by the fact that all the councils studied were founded through civil society engagement and, partly, in cooperation with already existing associations. Nevertheless, all of them operate as registered associations that offer a certain degree of professionalisation, visibility, and increased legitimacy. In studies on the alternative food movement, their alterity is seen as particularly important to the transformation processes (Sage et al., 2021), but the somewhat precarious conditions of primarily voluntary structures have gone unnoticed. Institutionalisation makes it easier to apply for funding from city administrations, political ministries, and foundations and such funding can be used to finance projects or salaried positions. One interviewee considered this crucial if FPCs are "to be sustainable at all because if we preach sustainability but then can't pay our staff, it's super difficult" (FPC3). Funding for paid positions enables more efficient administration of funds, membership applications, and public relations work. It also testifies to the need for defined responsibilities and institutionalisation if the organisation is to become something more than just "an initiative" (FPC5a). A close and productive cooperation with the city administration is also advantageous "in contrast to those who, let's say, act purely as opposition or who always say that they deliberately do not cooperate with local politics" (FPC1). Moreover, developing a holistic food strategy is a strategic instrument that can be used to facilitate such cooperation, especially if it addresses various political and administrative sectors, the private sector, and civil actors as per the models found in the US and the UK. Despite its informal character, a food strategy generates

a declaration of intent and, thus, engenders a level of commitment from the city and an impetus to implement the formulated goals (Moragues et al., 2013, pp. 6–7).

The complexity of the food system means that a variety of key criteria are required for the transformation processes, a reality that is reflected in the broad content of the working groups. Workshops and programmes for food education, urban gardening, and communal catering occur in a similar form in all the FPCs interviewed. Furthermore, the councils strive for comprehensive public participation, for example, through plenary meetings. This practice reflects the FPCs' understanding of participation as "a network, a platform, a voice...where everyone can participate, in contrast to the current system that has no space for decision-making, no participation" (FPC1). From a governmentality perspective, this can be considered as an understanding of "participants' and 'knowing' citizens who become active, responsible and productive" (Junge, 2008, p. 299, translation by the authors). An essential component here is the transfer of knowledge about how to create a sustainable transformation of the food system by addressing the issues presented below.

#### 4.2. Organic, Regional, Seasonal, and Just = Good Food for All?

The foundation for the transformation of the food system is more sustainable food production and consumption, as was mentioned several times in the interviews. Over time, sustainability has become accepted as a universal concept leading social change. "In the course of this development, what is understood by sustainability in each case has been enriched with very different perspectives and interests" (Neckel et al., 2018, p. 12, translation by the authors). FPCs consider sustainability in the food context as primarily based on consensual assumptions, that is, they assume "that everyone knows what is meant by it because everyone has the background" (FPC5b). However, a common definition is often missing, for example, "issues like meat or no meat...I think that many of us have individual positions and opinions on this, but we have not taken a common statement as an FPC" (FPC3). Instead, the interviewees identified the central elements of sustainable food using the keywords "organic," "regional," "seasonal," and "just," as is discussed in more detail below.

One interviewee articulated the idea thus: "As an FPC, we would say sustainable food or sustainably produced food is, for us, food that is certified organic" (FPC1). Such statements reflect the fact that the FPCs interviewed are simultaneously advocating for more sustainable conventional agriculture as part of their overarching transformation process:

Now it's not necessarily organic by a long shot, but we have to look at how we can strengthen their [the food producers'] economic situation so that they are then

in a position...to say...now I'm going into sustainable production. (FPC1)

Aspects of justice are also a key challenge for agricultural production, for example, "when it comes to working conditions, when it comes to fair wages along the entire value chain" (FPC4). "How do we manage to pay the producers a fair price and at the same time offer food at a price that everyone can afford?" (FPC3). Interactive events are one way to involve farmers in the transformation process, to tell them "you are not alone in your responsibility...politics must step in and support you" (FPC4). This is important because "the farmers are not to blame, they are who we have to take along with us in order to change things" (FPC4). In the field of agricultural production, the limited opportunities for FPCs to exert actual political influence are evident, with the result that demands are only being made of local politics. This is partly due to the complex, entrenched structures within the food system and partly due to the newness, missing financial resources, instability, and inadequate visibility of the FPCs (Schiff, 2008, p. 211).

In the globalised food market, organic products often fall into disrepute and are considered non-sustainable because of the long transport routes and the anonymity of the producers (Wiskerke, 2009). Therefore, the local is often considered more desirable and preferable to processes operating on larger scales. What is considered desirable about it varies but often includes "ecological sustainability, social justice, democracy, better nutrition, and food security, freshness, and quality" (Born & Purcell, 2006, p. 195; see also Ermann & Strüver, 2021, p. 182). As Prové et al. (2019, p. 180) point out in their comparative study of FPCs in Ghent and Philadelphia, many FPCs "take advantage of the momentum for the emergence of the local scale in food governance." Together with seasonality, regionality is also associated with better taste, "unlike the...tomatoes from Spain [which] are carted 2,000 km and don't taste at all, but only cost 99 cents or so" (FPC5b). Under the banner of regional and seasonal, FPCs can steer practices and governance through social and spatial construction of scale: "That's why it also makes sense that we initiate certain processes here on site that simply fit the region" (FPC3; see also Prové et al., 2019, p. 180). There is no fixed definition for regionality, and the term is frequently discussed within the FPCs (FPC3). However, their equation of regional with "good"—that is, more environmentally friendly and socially sustainable—is criticised *inter alia* by Born and Purcell (2006) who used the term "local trap" to counter the "assumption that the local is inherently good" (Born & Purcell, 2006, p. 195). Similarly, Winter (2003) uses the buzzword "defensive localism" to emphasise the moral exaggeration associated with localisation, which is also often protectionist in character as it seeks to protect "local" producers against competition from "outside."

A transformation of the food system not only requires the consumption of "good" food, but it also

means “that, sometimes, people may have to abstain from things” (FPC5b; see also Pritz, 2018, p. 77). The sacrifices that accompany eating regional and seasonal food are offset by the food’s compelling taste. One interviewee described the experience as follows: “When I really got used to seasonal fresh vegetables and also noticed how different they taste, how good they taste, how many flavours are in there and how alive the vegetables still are, that...gave them a completely different value” (FPC2).

Together with other normative attributes of food—for example, fair, vegetarian, or vegan—their consumption creates a clear conscience “not only for my health and the climate, but also for the taste and the cooking experience, for the pleasure then of eating” (FPC2; see also Ermann & Strüver, 2021, p. 181). Thus, in addition to the environmental consequences, aspects of health, taste, and enjoyment are also relevant and show that “every food and every act of eating establishes complex relations among countless humans and non-human beings and realities” (Lemke, 2012, p. 18, translation by the authors). However, the political strategies of FPCs rarely refer to health issues explicitly, which reveals a recognisable equation between sustainable food and a healthy diet. Health aspects, therefore, remain invisible and taking care of one’s health remains the responsibility of the individual.

On this basis, the FPCs’ projects typically address the development of responsible individuals who are expected to adhere more or less to what is considered good and bad, healthy and unhealthy. In this way, norms of the body and behaviour are not only constituted but also performatively changeable (Kühnemann & Günter, 2021, p. 199). Indeed, self and environmental responsibility, rationalities, and knowledge can be understood as the result of governmental logic (Foucault, 1979/2008, pp. 259–260; Lemke, 2014; Linnemann, 2018, p. 241). As a result, everyday practices such as sustainable shopping, cooking, and eating underlie strong bodily, temporal, and spatial imaginaries that shape the good way of eating.

#### *4.3. Generating Self and Environmental Responsibility in the Food System*

The previous sections have already touched on how changing diets through transformation processes and related normativity go hand in hand with very specific modes of subjectivation. As has been shown, they refer to both external and self-governing mechanisms of consumption. The FPCs interviewed explicitly reject prohibitions related to consumer behaviour and, instead, focus on educating critical and conscious subjects as “many people no longer know where a cucumber actually grows. What is actually in it. And this also applies to all other food products” (FPC5a). In addition, they believe that it is “actually better...to develop sustainable and responsible consumer behaviour from the very beginning” from

a young age, as “it’s easiest, so to speak, to do it in nurseries and primary schools because there are still a lot of opportunities there and children are still very open and want to discover things” (FPC1). This belief also drives the creation of sustainable offers in community catering through which people experience the food directly. All the FPCs interviewed have working groups focused on this issue as community programmes have the potential to reach a large number of people through municipal institutions such as hospitals and schools. The impact of community catering is a significant leverage point for gaining greater urban policy influence, this is, one interviewee declared, “where we can have an effect” (FPC4; see also Rückert-John et al., 2011, pp. 44–48).

Various cooking workshops, pandemic-related online dinners, and events for the self-preparation of food also address sustainable forms of eating equally well, “however, this then leads to consumption decisions being made differently or reconsidered” (FPC5). The mode of sustainable action is thus manifested in “subjective self-relations” (Pritz, 2018, p. 78, translation by the authors), whereby resulting technologies of the self relating to the understandings of sustainable food presented here become active and imply a specific causality between private actions and politicised consumption. An empirical study by Krüger and Strüver (2018) confirmed the mediated effect that ecological values and norms of sustainable consumption have on individualised food practices and discourses of responsibility. Thus, the interviewees in this study primarily assigned the responsibility and the power to shape sustainable food practices to consumers. This is consistent with the assumption that food becomes a bearer of demands for action and preferences to producers and “that’s why it’s super important to support regional products because where there’s a demand, the supply then adapts” (FPC2). The conception of eating as a political act that can be used to control production down to the smallest detail is taken up here as a strategy to transform the food system to “convince the city to put this issue on its agenda and address it” (FPC1; see also Ermann & Strüver, 2021). At the same time, it is acknowledged that “you can never blame an individual...[in order to] save the climate or be solely responsible for sustainability because that has a lot to do with structural things” (FPC3). Nevertheless, the project contents of the FPCs are often stuck on the individual level where “everyone [has to] somehow take a good look at themselves” (FPC1).

## **5. Conclusion**

With the growing awareness of the potential of cities to shape a more sustainable food system, FPCs, as part of the alternative food movement, are working to develop strategies and programmes for shaping food policy at the local level. This study has examined the work FPCs are doing to transform the food system from a governmentality perspective and with a focus on the underlying

power effects. The analysis is based on statements from interviews with members of FPCs in five German cities. The key issues identified include networking with a wide range of actors in the food system and designing agricultural production in a sustainable and just way. In this context, the attributes “organic,” “regional,” “seasonal,” and “just” were identified as the characteristics of “sustainable” food and a good way of eating in a green and just city. Thus, it has become clear how FPCs stimulate subjectivation processes through rationalities, knowledge, and the individualisation of environmental responsibility. Food education in schools, various workshops, and participatory activities convey the necessary knowledge, while citizens are called upon to actively participate by making sustainable and conscious consumption choices. In addition, an equation of sustainable food with a healthy diet was identified, whereby health appears as a private matter of self-care through conscious, health-promoting eating. While the transformation of the food system is a necessary and urgent goal, from the perspective of governmentality, research on alternative food movement initiatives, such as FPCs, facilitates critical engagement with reproduced power effects toward providing good food for all and “the making of environmental subjects” (Agrawal, 2005).

This study is based on interviews with German FPC members and not with representatives from the broader public reached by them. The results provide insight into the desired, as opposed to actual, changes that FPCs aim to bring about. Given this limitation, we suggest it would be useful for future research to combine both perspectives in order to generate deeper insights into the intertwining of power and knowledge regarding changing diets and consumer choices. Interviews with other actors in the food system addressed by FPCs, such as political representatives, farmers, caterers, or grocers may also offer further, deeper insight into the influences on local food policy.

### Acknowledgments

The authors thank the board members and spokespeople from the German Food Policy Councils who agreed to be interviewed. We also thank the reviewers for their excellent remarks.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### References

Agrawal, A. (2005). Environmentality: Community, intimate government, and the making of environmental subjects in Kumaon, India. *Current Anthropology*, 46(2), 161–190.

Allen, P. (2010). Realizing justice in local food systems. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*,

3(2), 295–308.

Andersson, I. (2016). Green cities’ going greener? Local environmental policy-making and place branding in the “greenest city in Europe.” *European Planning Studies*, 24(6), 1197–1215.

Barnett, C., Clarke, N., Cloke, P., & Malpass, A. (2008). The elusive subjects of neo-liberalism. *Cultural Studies*, 22(5), 624–653.

Bassarab, K., Santo, R., & Palmer, A. (2019). *Food Policy Council Report 2018*. John Hopkins Center for a Livable Future; Food Policy Networks. [https://assets.jhsph.edu/clf/mod\\_clfResource/doc/FPC%20Report%202018-FINAL-4-1-19.pdf](https://assets.jhsph.edu/clf/mod_clfResource/doc/FPC%20Report%202018-FINAL-4-1-19.pdf)

Bogner, A., & Menz, W. (2002). Das theoriegenerierende Experteninterview: Erkenntnisinteresse, Wissensform, Interaktion [The theory-generating expert interview: Interest in knowledge, form of knowledge, interaction]. In A. Bogner, B. Littig, & W. Menz (Eds.), *Das Experteninterview: Theorie, Methode, Anwendungsfelder* [The expert interview: Theory, method, fields of application] (pp. 33–70). Springer.

Born, B., & Purcell, M. (2006). Avoiding the local trap: Scale and food systems in planning research. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 26(2), 195–207.

Breuste, J., Artmann, M., Ioja, C., & Qureshi, S. (2020). *Making green cities: Concepts, challenges and practices* (2nd ed.). Springer.

Convey, J. (2006). *Food, morals and meaning: The pleasure and anxiety of eating* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Demrovski, B. (2021). *Das Klimakochbuch: Klimafreundlich einkaufen, kochen und genießen* [The climate cookbook: Climate-friendly shopping, cooking and enjoying] (3rd ed.). Franckh-Kosmos.

Doherty, R. (2007). Critically framing education policy: Foucault, discourse and governmentality. *Counterpoints*, 292, 193–204.

DuPuis, E. M., & Goodman, D. (2005). Should we go “home” to eat? Toward a reflexive politics of localism. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 21(3), 359–371.

Ermann, U., & Strüver, A. (2021). How to do good food? Nachhaltige Ernährung zwischen Kommunikation und Konsum aus Perspektive der geographischen Ernährungsforschung [How to do good food? Sustainable eating between communication and consumption from the perspective of geographical food research]. In J. Godemann & T. Bartelmeß (Eds.), *Ernährungskommunikation* [Food communication] (pp. 177–194). Springer.

Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture. (2020). *Politik für eine nachhaltigere Ernährung: Eine integrierte Ernährungspolitik entwickeln und faire Ernährungsumgebungen gestalten—WBAE-Gutachten* [Policies for more sustainable diets: Developing integrated food policies and designing fair food environments—WBA report]. [https://www.bmel.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/\\_Ministerium/Beiraete/agrarpolitik/wbae-gutachten-nachhaltigernaehrung.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=3](https://www.bmel.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/_Ministerium/Beiraete/agrarpolitik/wbae-gutachten-nachhaltigernaehrung.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=3)

- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: An introduction* (Vol. 1). Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4), 777–795.
- Foucault, M. (1988). Technologies of the self. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman, & P. H. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 16–49). Tavistock Publications.
- Foucault, M. (1991). *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*. Semiotext(e).
- Foucault, M. (2008). The birth of biopolitics, 21 March 1979. In M. Senellart (Ed.), *The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979* (pp. 239–266). Palgrave Macmillan. (Original work published 1979)
- Foucault, M. (2011). *The courage of truth: The government of self and others II—Lectures at the College de France, 1983–1984*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Füller, H., & Marquardt, N. (2009). Gouvernementalität in der humangeographischen Diskursforschung [Governmentality in human geography discourse research]. In G. Glasze & A. Matissek (Eds.), *Handbuch Diskurs und Raum: Theorien und Methoden für die Humangeographie sowie die sozial- und kulturwissenschaftliche Raumerforschung* [Handbook discourse and space: Theories and methods for human geography as well as social and cultural studies and spatial research] (pp. 83–106). transcript.
- German Advisory Council on Global Change. (2011). *World in transition: A social contract for sustainability*. [https://www.wbgu.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/wbgu/publikationen/hauptgutachten/hg2011/pdf/wbgu\\_jg2011\\_en.pdf](https://www.wbgu.de/fileadmin/user_upload/wbgu/publikationen/hauptgutachten/hg2011/pdf/wbgu_jg2011_en.pdf)
- Goodman, D., DuPuis, E. M., & Goodman, M. K. (2013). Engaging alternative food networks: Commentaries and research agendas. *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food*, 20(3), 425–431.
- Guthman, J. (2008). Neoliberalism and the making of food politics in California. *Geoforum*, 39(3), 1171–1183.
- Hälterlein, J. (2015). *Die Regierung des Konsums* [The government of consumption]. Springer.
- Hamilton, N. D. (2002). Putting a face on our food: How state and local food policies can promote the new agriculture. *Drake Journal of Agricultural Law*, 7(2), 407–443.
- Hammelmann, C. (2022). *Greening cities by growing food: A political ecology analysis of urban agriculture in the Americas*. Springer.
- Harper, A., Shattuk, A., Holt-Giménez, E., Alkon, A., & Lambrick, F. (2009). *Food policy councils: Lessons learned* (Development Report No. 21). Institute for Food and Development Policy. <https://archive.foodfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/DR21-Food-Policy-Councils-Lessons-Learned-.pdf>
- Hodgson, K. (2019). *Food policy councils: Helping local, regional, and state governments address food system challenges*. American Planning Association. <https://ucanr.edu/sites/MarinFoodPolicyCouncil/files/178441.pdf>
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2014). *Climate change 2014—Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability. Part A: Global and sectoral aspects—Working Group II contribution to the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report*. Cambridge University Press.
- Junge, T. (2008). *Gouvernementalität der Wissensgesellschaft: Politik und Subjektivität unter dem Regime des Wissens* [Governmentality of the knowledge society: Politics and subjectivity under the regime of knowledge]. transcript.
- Krüger, T., & Strüver, A. (2018). Narrative der guten Ernährung: Ernährungsidentitäten und die Aneignung öffentlicher Nachhaltigkeitsdiskurse durch Konsument\*innen [Narratives of good food: Food identities and the appropriation of public sustainability discourses by consumers]. *Zeitschrift für Wirtschaftsgeographie*, 62(2/3), 217–232.
- Kühnemann, P., & Günter, S. (2021). “Superfood ist nicht genug”: Sport und Ernährung im Gesundheitsdiskurs [“Superfood is not enough”: Sport and eating in the health discourse]. In J. Godemann & T. Bartelmeß (Eds.), *Ernährungskommunikation* [Food communication] (pp. 195–210). Springer.
- Lemke, H. (2012). *Politik des Essens: Wovon die Welt von morgen lebt* [The politics of eating: What the world of tomorrow lives on]. transcript.
- Lemke, T. (2014). Gouvernementalität [Governmentality]. In C. Kammler, R. Parr, U. J. Schneider, & E. Reinhardt-Becker (Eds.), *Foucault-Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung* [Foucault handbook. Life – Work – Impact] (pp. 260–263). Springer.
- Linnemann, K. (2018). Die Gouvernementalität widerständiger Alltagspraktiken: Eine konzeptionelle Annäherung an Postwachstum, Subjektivierung und alltägliches Gegen-Führen [The governmentality of everyday practices of resistance: A conceptual approach to degrowth, subjectivation and everyday counter-conduct]. *Zeitschrift für Wirtschaftsgeographie*, 62(3/4), 233–245.
- Matissek, A., Pfaffenbach, C., & Reuber, P. (2013). *Methoden der empirischen Humangeographie* [Methods of empirical human geography] (2nd ed.). Westermann.
- Mayring, P. (2015). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlagen und Techniken* [Qualitative content analysis: Basics and techniques] (12th ed.). Beltz.
- Milan Urban Food Policy Pact. (2015). *Milan Urban Food Policy Pact*. <https://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Milan-Urban-Food-Policy-Pact-EN.pdf>
- Moragues, A., Morgan, K., Moschwitz, H., Neimane, I., Nilsson, H., Pinto, M., Rohrer, H., Ruiz, R., Thuswald, M., Tisenkopfs, T., & Halliday, J. (2013). *Urban food strategies: The rough guide to sustainable food systems*. Foodlinks. [https://orgprints.org/id/eprint/28860/1/foodlinks-Urban\\_food\\_strategies.pdf](https://orgprints.org/id/eprint/28860/1/foodlinks-Urban_food_strategies.pdf)

- Neckel, S., Besedovsky, N., Boddenberg, M., Hasenfratz, M., Pritz, S. M., & Wiegand, T. (2018). *Die Gesellschaft der Nachhaltigkeit: Umriss eines Forschungsprogramms* [The society of sustainability: Outlines of a research programme]. transcript.
- Netzwerk der Ernährungsräte. (n.d.). *Ernährungsdemokratie Jetzt!* [Food democracy now!]. <https://ernaehrungsraete.org>
- Pothukuchi, K., & Kaufman, J. L. (1999). Placing the food system on the urban agenda: The role of municipal institutions in food systems planning. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 16, 213–224.
- Pritz, S. M. (2018). Subjektivierung von Nachhaltigkeit [Subjectification of sustainability]. In S. Neckel, N. Besedovsky, M. Boddenberg, M. Hasenfratz, S. M. Pritz, & T. Wiegand (Eds.), *Die Gesellschaft der Nachhaltigkeit: Umriss eines Forschungsprogramms* [The society of sustainability: Outlines of a research programme] (pp. 77–100). transcript.
- Prové, C., De Krom, M. P. M. M., & Dessein, J. (2019). Politics of scale in urban agriculture governance: A transatlantic comparison of food policy councils. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 68, 171–181.
- Reckwitz, A. (2017). *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten: Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne* [The society of singularities: On the structural change of modernity]. Suhrkamp.
- Renting, H., Marsden, T. K., & Banks, J. (2003). Understanding alternative food networks: Exploring the role of short food supply chains in rural development. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 35(3), 393–411.
- Renting, H., Schermer, M., & Rossi, A. (2012). Building food democracy: Exploring civic food networks and newly emerging forms of food citizenship. *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food*, 19(3), 289–307.
- Roberts, W. (2010). Food policy encounters of a third kind: How the Toronto Food Policy Council socializes for sustainability. In A. Blay-Palmer (Ed.), *Imagining sustainable food systems: Theory and practice* (pp. 173–200). Routledge.
- Rückert-John, J., John, R., & Niessen, J. (2011). Nachhaltige Ernährung außer Haus—Der Essalltag von morgen [Sustainable food outside the home—The everyday eating routine of tomorrow]. In A. Ploeger, G. Hirschfelder, & G. Schönberger (Eds.), *Die Zukunft auf dem Tisch: Analysen, Trends und Perspektiven der Ernährung von morgen* [The future on the table: Analyses, trends, and perspectives of tomorrow's diet] (pp. 41–55). Springer.
- Sage, C., Kropp, C., & Antoni-Komar, I. (2021). Grassroots initiatives in food system transformation: The role of food movements in the second “great transformation.” In C. Sage, C. Kropp, & I. Antoni-Komar (Eds.), *Food system transformations: Social movements, local economies, collaborative networks* (pp. 1–19). Routledge.
- Schiff, R. (2008). The role of food policy councils in developing sustainable food systems. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, 3(2/3), 206–228.
- Stierand, P. (2016). Urbane Wege zur nachhaltigen Lebensmittelversorgung: Potentiale und Instrumente kommunaler Ernährungspolitik [Urban paths to sustainable food supply: Potentials and instruments of municipal food policy]. In S. Engler, O. Stengel, & W. Bommert (Eds.), *Regional, innovativ und gesund. Nachhaltige Ernährung als Teil der Großen Transformation* [Regional, innovative, and healthy: Sustainable nutrition as part of the great transformation] (pp. 117–136). Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Strüver, A. (2009). Grundlagen und zentrale Begriffe der Foucault'schen Diskurstheorie [Basics and central concepts of Foucault's discourse theory]. In G. Glasze & A. Matissek (Eds.), *Handbuch Diskurs und Raum: Theorien und Methoden für die Humangeographie sowie die sozial- und kulturwissenschaftliche Raumforschung* [Handbook discourse and space: Theories and methods for human geography as well as social and cultural studies and spatial research] (pp. 61–82). transcript.
- Swyngedouw, E. (2005). Governance innovation and the citizen: The Janus face of governance-beyond-the-state. *Urban Studies*, 42(11), 1991–2006.
- Winter, M. (2003). Embeddedness, the new food economy and defensive localism. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 19(1), 23–32.
- Wiskerke, J. C. S. (2009). On places lost and places regained: Reflections on the alternative food geography and sustainable regional development. *International Planning Studies*, 14(4), 369–387.

## About the Authors



**Alena Birnbaum** studied human geography at the University of Münster. In her current position at the Department of Landscape Planning and Communication at the University of Kassel, she researches and teaches on topics of food geographies, environmental justice, and urban and regional planning. Her dissertation project focuses on agricultural production in growing urban regions in relation to soil protection and open space preservation.



**Petra Lütke** is a senior researcher at the University of Münster, Germany, with an academic background in human geography. Her research interests focus on the intersections between urban geography, food geography, and spatial planning. One of her recent research projects analyses the implicit relationship between food practices and urban development processes in neoliberal contexts.