CULTIVATE WHITE PAPER

Lessons from the Policy Dialogues

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Food sharing, partnerships, infrastructure and social cohesion in Milan, Barcelona and Utrecht

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Term	Definition
Hub location	In the context of CULTIVATE, Hub locations were activation sites for project innovations
Spoke location	In the context of CULTIVATE, Spoke locations were replication sites for project innovations
Food Sharing Initiative	(FSIs) FSIs are organisations that help to facilitate diverse forms of food sharing, including sharing food itself, but also seeds, plants, food products and meals, as well as sharing spaces for growing or cooking and eating together, or sharing skills and knowledge. FSIs may adopt different organisational forms, including co-operatives and social enterprises, charities and for-profits, and they can be led by grassroots, community, private sector or state actors
Marketplace	A food sharing forum practiced in CULTIVATE (ICLEI methodology)

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Preamble

Rather than answering a specific research question, this White Paper compiles a rich field of experience that will help shape future research agendas. It synthesises the findings of three policy dialogues held in Milan, Barcelona and Utrecht, in the framework of the EU Horizon project CULTIVATE, and takes food sharing initiatives (FSIs) as its throughline — the concrete practice against which the dialogues' findings are read.

Utrecht's dialogue looked directly at what FSIs can deliver: wellbeing, social connectedness, health. Barcelona's dialogue, on wholesale markets as infrastructure for the social and solidarity economy, asks where such initiatives can be physically anchored and scale. Milan's dialogue, on public-private partnerships for sustainability and food waste reduction, informs debates about what kind of governance models can give FSIs the institutional legs to move from local experiment to lasting infrastructure. Read together, the three dialogues trace a single arc around food sharing — its social purpose, the infrastructure that can host it, and the partnerships that can sustain it[1].

What makes these dialogues distinctive is not the topics themselves, but the method: each city was asked to engage with an issue that was not its own, reacting to another city's priorities rather than restating its own agenda. Policymakers, scholars and civil society organisations sat at the same table, and the resulting material carries the texture of that friction — diverse urban experiences invited to speak to one another.

This White Paper is built to travel. Its findings are organised around concrete, transferable arguments rather than city-specific case narratives, so a reader from another city can situate their own questions in someone else's experience. It is meant to be picked apart, quoted, and put to use — the beginning of a conversation across European cities, not a record of one that has already ended.

> **A note on how social innovation is used[2]**
>
> CULTIVATE describes the Food Sharing Compass as a *social innovation support platform* for food sharing initiatives, policymakers, food supply actors, researchers and citizens (CULTIVATE, n.d.). In this paper, the term

1 *This document includes recommendations: each recommendation ends with a bracketed tag naming who is best placed to act on it. The tags were assigned by the editors, from the content of the discussions and from the competences of each level of government, and were not agreed by participants. Each case also opens with a short fact box summarising place, period, partners, scale and main challenge.*

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> Where a dialogue moves from describing an established practice to testing a new governance, financing, measurement or service model, the text is marked with a box like this one. The boxes are editorial signposts, not findings of the dialogues. They flag where participants were working at the edge of established practice and where the evidence is, accordingly, thinner.

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social innovation follows Murray, Caulier-Grice, and Mulgan (2010): new ideas — products, services and models — that meet social needs while creating new social relationships or collaborations.

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Food sharing and Public-Private Partnership

As highlighted in the European Commissions' FOOD 2040 Strategy, food systems are at the heart of some of the EU's most pressing challenges. Food waste in particular is increasingly entering urban policy agendas. Tackling it requires governance models that combine innovation, accountability, and collaboration. Public-Private Partnership (PPP) schemes are increasingly presented as a viable response, combining private-sector efficiency with public sector interest in ensuring places thrive sustainably, recognising vital non-profit expertise in delivering for communities. With public interest as the guiding principle, the legitimacy of PPP depends on transparency at every stage, which is also what allows their results to be compared with those of conventional public interventions.

The Milan Policy Dialogue explored the nexus between food waste reduction, PPPs and sustainability as a space to address urban challenges. It offered three perspectives on the issue from Barcelona, Milan and Utrecht, enabling participants to learn from different experiences, engage with one another's challenges, and co-develop recommendations for the EU level. These are summarised below.

1.1. La Marga

Place	Barcelona (seven districts)
Period	6–11 February 2025 (fifth annual edition)
Partners	Municipality of Barcelona; Fundació Espigoladors; local organisations and residents; Public Health Agency (analysis); Es imperfect® kitchens
Scale	More than 550 volunteers; 4,930 kg of bitter oranges; 13,400 jars; 58 distribution points
Main challenge	Full dependence on public funding; an ordinance bars commercialising produce grown in the urban area

The #BarcelonaEspigola 2025 initiative, held from 6 to 11 February 2025, gave a second life to the city's bitter oranges. Promoted by the Municipality of Barcelona in collaboration with Fundació Espigoladors, it encourages full use of food resources through green and circular economy initiatives that foster citizen participation to help make the city healthier, fairer and more sustainable. This fifth consecutive edition took place across seven districts of Barcelona, with more than 550 volunteers from local organisations and residents taking part in fruit-picking activities. A total of 4,930 kg of bitter oranges were collected and transformed into 13,400 jars of marmalade. Once analysed by the Public Health Agency, the collected oranges were processed into marmalade in the kitchens of Es imperfect®. Under the name "La Marga", the marmalade was distributed by social organisations in each district to people experiencing food poverty and those at risk of social exclusion. The project also included communication and awareness-raising campaigns, alongside a series of workshops addressing food waste.

The need for food recovery and redistribution in Barcelona far exceeds what this practice alone can reach, but it proved valuable in raising awareness of food waste and demonstrating the impact circular economy practices can have on food recovery and redistribution. The associations involved

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were also empowered as intermediaries between the community and the neighbourhood, given the practice's local impact: the 13,400 jars of La Marga were distributed across 58 facilities, educational centres and citizen entities, which then decided independently how to redistribute them.
The main challenge to the practice's sustainability is financial: it currently depends entirely on public investment. Diversifying toward private financing would help, but commercialising such products is currently precluded by municipal ordinance.

1.1.1. Discussion

The Barcelona case pushed the dialogue toward a question the other two Hub cities had not had to confront as directly: what happens when the regulatory environment itself blocks the paths to financial independence that PPPs elsewhere rely on? Participants noted the contrast with Milan and Utrecht, where diversified funding and private engagement were framed as achievable next steps; in Barcelona, the municipal ordinance against commercialising urban-grown produce foreclosed that option outright, regardless of the private sector's willingness to engage. This shifted the discussion from "how do we attract private financing" to "how do we build alternatives that do not require it" — crowdsourced and donation-based models, financial intermediaries such as social enterprises or foundations, and public procurement as a lever were all raised as ways to generate revenue without requiring the removal of the regulatory constraint. The facilitator pressed the group on durability: if La Marga's impact depends so heavily on continued public investment and goodwill from participating associations, what protects it from being deprioritised after a change in municipal administration? The group's answer converged with a theme raised elsewhere in the dialogues — institutionalising the practice as part of the city's identity, rather than treating it as a discretionary annual initiative, was seen as the strongest safeguard against political risk. The conversation closed on with the regulatory question left unresolved: several participants argued that outdated food safety and commercialisation rules, not funding models, were the real structural obstacle, and that changing them would require collective advocacy well beyond what any single practice could mount alone.

These concerns are consistent with CULTIVATE's review of food sharing governance, which lists food safety rules designed for commercial activities, and limits on the use of space and access to resources, among the main policy barriers faced by FSIs (CULTIVATE, 2024; see also Zurek, 2016). Barcelona's ordinance is a particularly clear instance, because it closes the commercial route altogether.

> **Financing without commercialisation**
> The group's shfiting discussion from "how do we attract private financing" to "how do we build alternatives that don't require it" suggests different arrangements should be considered: donation-based models, intermediary social enterprises or foundations, and procurement. None of these were tested in the Barcelona case. They are better read as hypotheses to be piloted, and evaluated.

1.1.2. Recommendations

- **Mandate research into comparative PPP models and strategies.** The EU should fund research and assessment comparing various non-public models (e.g. co-operative models) to inform

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policy. Initiatives must be supported in selecting a change strategy that directly links to clear objectives (e.g. scaling vs. social cohesion). **[Who should act: EU institutions (research funding); researchers]**

- **Promote hybrid and alternative financing mechanisms.** Policy should encourage diversified funding streams — crowdsourcing and donations (e.g. "pay as you feel" models or targeted campaigns like a "Christmas sponsor"); financial intermediaries such as social enterprises, NGOs or foundations to manage finances and territorial-based commercialisation (sometimes called community wealth building) which protects the essence of communities; and transition funding, allocated specifically by the EU to bridge the gap as a project moves from full public funding toward a more independent, self-sufficient model. **[Who should act: EU institutions; city governments; philanthropic funders; Third Sector organisations]**
- **Harness strategic public procurement.** The EU should recommend and provide resources for local authorities to explore public procurement as a leverage tool. While regulatory restrictions must be acknowledged, procurement can provide a stable revenue stream for community initiatives. **[Who should act: City governments; EU institutions (guidance and resources)]**
- **Institutionalise practices against political risk.** Local governments must be encouraged to build successful practices into a strong tradition or part of the city's identity, making such projects harder to dismantle following changes in administration. **[Who should act: City governments]**
- **Address restrictive food safety regulations.** The EU and all competent authorities must encourage mechanisms for collectively addressing difficult, often outdated, regulations — such as those preventing urban residents from commercialising their own vegetables. While changing regulations is a difficult path, collective advocacy by urban garden groups and policymakers should be supported. **[Who should act: EU institutions; national and local regulators; garden groups and FSIs (advocacy)]**

1.2. Food Aid Hubs

Place	Milan (eight hubs across city districts)
Period	Launched 2019; expanded 2020–2024; ongoing
Partners	Municipality of Milan (Food Policy Office); Politecnico di Milano; Fondazione Snam; Fondazione Cariplo; Assolombarda; Third Sector organisations; retail and wholesale donors
Scale	Eight active hubs; aim of halving food waste by 2030
Main challenge	Stable funding, stakeholder engagement and efficient logistics

The Food Aid Hubs constitute a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) conceived to counter food waste and food poverty in Milan. Their objectives are to recover surplus food from supermarkets, markets and canteens and redistribute it to vulnerable citizens, while advancing sustainability and social inclusion. The partnership brings together the Municipality of Milan (Food Policy Office), Politecnico di Milano, Fondazione Snam, Fondazione Cariplo, Assolombarda, and a range of Third Sector organisations — NGOs, charities and cooperatives — supported by food donations from private retailers and wholesalers. Launched in 2019 and expanded over 2020–2024, the practice now operates through eight active hubs across Milan's city districts and remains ongoing, with the explicit aim of halving food waste by 2030 in line with the UN SDGs and the Milan Food Policy.

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The Food Aid Hubs asked what role wholesale markets — and this case study specifically — can play in supporting food sharing in cities. The practice demonstrates how a sustainable ecosystem can emerge from combining public coordination, private donation, and third sector management. Hubs recover surplus from retailers, markets and canteens and channel it efficiently to vulnerable citizens. Shared resources, co-design and cross-sector collaboration reduce waste, ensure balanced nutrition, strengthen local networks, and embed circular economy principles capable of delivering long-term social and environmental impact.

As for the main challenge to the practice's sustainability, it lies in securing stable funding, sustaining stakeholder engagement, and maintaining efficient logistics over time. Reliance on voluntary donations and fluctuating food surpluses introduces structural uncertainty, while coordinating a diverse set of publics, private and third sector partners demands continuous commitment. Strengthening governance, financial resilience, and supply consistency is therefore essential to securing the practice's lasting impact.

1.2.1. Discussion

The facilitator opened by asking participants what would actually convince a private partner to stay at the table in such an activity beyond the pilot phase. A municipal representative answered first: without a way to prove the return on their involvement, private engagement remains goodwill rather than strategy — "if you can measure the social impact, the private sector will follow" became the line the group kept returning to, and the facilitator noted it on the board as the session's first working principle.

From there, the discussion turned out to who should hold that table together. A cooperative representative pushed back on framing PPPs as the endpoint: state and large companies could coordinate funding, but the initiatives that actually moved food were run by local "captains" — the individuals and small organisations doing the daily logistics — and any governance model that left them out would be brittle. The facilitator asked what stood in their way most concretely, and the answer came quickly: legal ambiguity around donations, food safety liability, and procurement rules, which several participants described as quietly strangling networks that were otherwise ready to scale. This led naturally to the question of scale itself — how do you "supersize Davids", as one participant put it, without breaking the short chains, farmer relationships, storage and transport arrangements that made small actors effective in the first place? The facilitator closed the working group by asking what would sustain all of this beyond funding cycles, and the group converged on people: without public awareness and a pipeline of "food champions" trained to carry this work forward, none of the structural fixes discussed would outlast the individuals currently holding them together.

Scaling small actors

The "captains" argument raises a question the dialogue did not settle: can the informal, relationship-based logistics that make small actors effective be scaled without losing their essential characteristics? If a social innovation is partly defined by the new relationships it creates (Murray et al., 2010), then scaling it is not only a matter of replicating a model, because the relationships are part of what must be carried across. The bottlenecks around short chains, farmer relationships, storage and transport are where that tension becomes concrete.

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1.2.2. Recommendations

- **Standardise social impact measurement for private engagement.** Policies must prioritise frameworks where social impact can be measured. This quantifiable data is essential because, as participants put it, "if you can measure the social impact, the private sector will follow". **[Who should act: City governments; researchers; funders]**
- **Foster broad ecosystem governance.** Funding should support initiatives that actively engage with a broader ecosystem of stakeholders in governance, including not only the state and large companies but also local leaders referred to as "captains". PPPs must be carefully coordinated, as they are a necessary step but not a complete solution. **[Who should act: City governments; funders; local "captains"]**
- **Streamline regulatory landscapes.** Municipalities must be guided to address the legal details concerning food safety, donations, and public procurement that act as structural obstacles to the function of food aid networks. This involves clarifying rules for donations and the operation of external actors. **[Who should act: City governments; national and regional regulators]**
- **Invest in strategic planning and logistics.** Support is needed for strategic planning around social integration, social innovation, and logistics. This includes finding ways to "supersize Davids" (small actors) and tackling bottlenecks related to short chains, farmers, storage and transport. **[Who should act: City governments; funders; Third Sector organisations]**
- **Promote knowledge and skills development.** EU initiatives should include programmes to raise public awareness and sensitivity. This includes creating "food champions" and educating the public on sustainable food practices. **[Who should act: EU institutions; city governments; Third Sector organisations]**

1.3. Covenant "Together we eat the Province of Utrecht more beautiful"

Place	Within the regional boundaries of the Province of Utrecht
Period	March 2024–March 2027
Partners	Producers, processors, wholesalers, customers, companies and institutions: Vermaat, Lokalist, Local2local, MVO Nederland, Udea, Triodos bank, Kas meeting eventlocatie, Antropia, Oregional, Gemeente Utrecht, WWF, Jaarbeurs, Provincie Utrecht, NS, The Green House, Health fridge, Streekproducten uit het Groene Hart, Qeet, BD totaal, gemeente Leusden, Compass Group, st Antonius, Albron, gemeente Amersfoort.
Scale	2 effective chains: broodje Utrecht and regional grainchain
Main challenge	Keeping the short chains going after the covenant ends

The starting point for this covenant (March 2024–March 2027) is the policy of the Province of Utrecht that food consumption should shift toward the short chain and toward healthier, more sustainable diets. Implementing this policy calls for better alignment between regional supply and demand for sustainable, locally produced food — a response to the challenges facing future food production around biodiversity, climate adaptation and mitigation, water and soil. A transition is needed to keep producing food in harmony with nature, water, soil, people and animals, and short

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supply chains can accelerate this transition by offering farmers a viable perspective for action. Because food production involves many partners — from producers and processors to wholesalers and customers — bringing them together is essential to effective cooperation, and a PPP approach provides the means to do so. The covenant accommodates the differing ambitions of the companies and institutions involved, ranging from a "bronze" level, where taking the first steps is already a challenge, to a "gold" level, where ambitions are set as high and demanding as possible. By signing up for the covenant, participants commit to the agreed goals, subject to annual evaluation.

The covenant is organised around 5 goals: locally produced food; organic food; ratio of animal based versus plant-based products; reduction of food waste; and biodiversity growth. Besides measuring the improvements of each signed organisation on these 5 goals, there are also some overarching projects. By bringing all the PPP partners together, product chains were formed. Some more successful than others.

The main challenge to the practice's sustainability is ensuring that the short chains established through the covenant's cross-partner cooperation continue once the covenant ends. The coming years must focus on growing what are currently small-scale initiatives into independent business cases able to sustain themselves. There is nonetheless confidence that the network built between partners is strong, and that contact between the parties will continue beyond the covenant's formal term.

1.3.1. Discussion

The Utrecht case brings into sharp relief a tension already visible in Milan and Barcelona: cooperation built to last only as long as its founding agreement. Participants in the dialogue recognised the covenant's tiered ambition model — from bronze to gold — as a pragmatic way to keep diverse partners at the table but pressed on what happens once the covenant's three-year horizon closes and the "soft power" of the municipality is no longer backed by a signed commitment.

The discussion turned, as in the other Hub cities, to the private sector's conditions for staying engaged: measurable impact and visible recognition, rather than funding alone, were seen as what could carry short chains past the covenant's expiry.[3] Equally central was the question of who convenes the table once the covenant no longer exists — whether the municipality should remain the facilitator by default, or whether governance should evolve toward a model, such as Freiburg's Food Policy Council, in which the city sits as one actor among equals. The group converged on a shared concern: without a deliberate handover from covenant-based cooperation to institutionalised, self-sustaining governance, even a well-designed short-chain network risks reverting to fragmented, small-scale effort once its founding document lapses.

> **Tiered commitment and the handover problem**
> The bronze-to-gold structure is a commitment device designed to accommodate unequal starting points. The open question is the handover from a time-limited covenant to a body that no longer depends on the municipality's convening role. Freiburg, one of CULTIVATE's Spoke locations, was cited as a reference for a model

3 See also Davies, A. R. (2026). Estimating the hidden sustainability contributions from food sharing initiatives for municipal food governance. *Politics and Governance*.

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in which the city is one actor among equals; this paper has no evidence yet on how such a transition performs in practice.

1.3.2. Recommendations

- **Formalise the Public Administration role as strategic facilitator.** The EU should recognise and formalise the strategic role of the Public Administration as a creator of partnerships and strategic alliances. Even where the municipality's power is "soft", its ability to convene a table with local shops and logistics providers is key to making local food more affordable by sharing costs. **[Who should act: EU institutions (recognition); city governments]**
- **Subsidise shared logistics and physical hubs.** Financial support is needed to share logistics costs so initiatives can reach more people, and resources should be allocated to physical hubs that give food somewhere to go, addressing the logistical difficulties restaurants and social enterprises face when procuring from small producers. Support is required to help offset the cost difference relative to the cheaper conventional system. **[Who should act: City and regional governments; EU funding programmes]**
- **Incentivise private sector participation through recognition.** The EU should promote non-financial recognition models — encouraging "zero food waste awards" for restaurants demonstrating fair and sustainable practices, drawing on successful examples such as "healthy choice awards" that provide valued recognition for businesses. **[Who should act: EU institutions; city governments; business associations]**
- **Promote hybrid funding and broad governance.** Hybrid funding models should be encouraged, referencing successful examples where initial crowdfunding was matched by the municipality (such as So.De, Social Delivery in Milan). Initiatives should also be supported in building a broader ecosystem of stakeholders beyond existing covenants, drawing on governance models such as the Freiburg Food Policy Council, where the city acts as one equal actor among many. **[Who should act: City governments; FSIs; philanthropic funders]**

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Food sharing and urban infrastructure

Wholesale markets can supply nutritious food to social economy organisations efficiently, owing to their governance, their high concentration of operators, and their logistic readiness. Conversely, social economy operators can help multiply the value of that food for the common good in innovative ways. This perspective is aligned with the findings of the report by the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP) and the World Union of Wholesale Markets (WUWM), *Wholesale markets: public spaces for interconnected food policies* (2024), which highlights how wholesale markets serve as strategic infrastructures within urban food systems. They can play a significant role in reducing food losses and waste, thanks to their capacity to centralise flows, implement quality and safety controls, and redistribute surpluses through food banks and social partners.

Modern wholesale markets, such as Mercabarna in Barcelona and Foody-Milano in Milan, are increasingly becoming multi-functional public assets, capable of integrating sustainability, food security and social equity objectives through cross-sector governance models and circular economy strategies. The Barcelona Policy Dialogue also included a case study from Utrecht, which does not have a wholesale market *stricto sensu* and was therefore used as a counterfactual baseline in the group discussion.

These insights reinforce the strategic relevance of promoting recovery and redistribution hubs within wholesale markets as a driver for social and solidarity economy initiatives.

1.4. Foodback

Place	Mercabarna wholesale market, Barcelona
Period	Inaugurated 31 March 2022
Partners	Mercabarna; Banc dels Aliments de BCN; Formació i Treball; Assocome and others
Scale	900 m² centre; 2024: 1,233 tonnes received, nearly 850 tonnes (about 70%) recovered
Main challenge	Surplus handling depends on each wholesaler's internal policies

Foodback, the Food Recovery Center, is a pioneering project in the management of surpluses in Spain's wholesale markets, marking a further step in Mercabarna's commitment to combating food waste. It introduces a new system for managing organic plant matter outside the standard marketing circuit, giving surplus fruit and vegetables a second life. Foodback is the key infrastructure within this system: produce supplied by Mercabarna operators is sorted, and depending on the outcome, either distributed to social entities as first recipients or transformed for maximum use.

The project thereby converts waste into a resource, generating positive impacts for both the environment and society. It serves users of the Central Fruit and Vegetable Market, Biomarket and Zac, with Banc dels Aliments de BCN and Formació i Treball as social partners. Foodback was inaugurated on 31 March 2022 in a new 900 m² warehouse inside the Mercabarna food estate (Mercabarna, 2022). It is run by Mercabarna with the Fundació Banc dels Aliments, which organises

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distribution, and Formació i Treball, which employs people at risk of social exclusion to sort the produce. Assocome (the association of Mercabarna companies), Càritas, the Red Cross and other partners collaborate (Ajuntament de Barcelona, n.d.). For 2024, the centre reports 1,233 tonnes of fruit and vegetables received, of which nearly 850 tonnes, around 70%, were recovered and redistributed (Catalan News, 2025).

Foodback specifically points toward the potential to replicate this fruit and vegetable surplus management model across all wholesale markets. The main challenge to its sustainability is that surplus management depends on each wholesaler's internal policies, over which Foodback has no authority.

1.5. Foody Zero Sprechi

Place	Foody wholesale market, Milan (managed by Sogemi)
Period	Temporary hub during the first lockdown (2020); permanent depot allocated in December 2021
Partners	Sogemi; Municipality of Milan; wholesalers; volunteers; a citywide network of associations
Scale	138 tonnes handled by the lockdown hub
Main challenge	Systematic, constant and logistically sound recovery of fresh produce

Sogemi (the publicly owned company managing the wholesale market in Milan) has actively contributed to the Milan Food Policy project, which, from the pandemic onward, initiated and implemented a network of neighbourhood hubs for the recovery and redistribution of unsold food products that would otherwise increase food waste. During the first lockdown, the Municipality of Milan and Sogemi developed a temporary hub as part of the Food Aid Mechanism, collecting and redistributing fruit and vegetables to families in need and managing over 138 tonnes of produce in the process. In December 2021, Sogemi allocated a depot within the Fruit and Vegetable Market for the recovery of food surpluses; volunteers and operators at the hub select fruit and vegetables donated by wholesalers and distribute them to a citywide network of associations, transforming the food market into a logistical hub of solidarity.

Wholesale markets play a public role in shaping municipal food policies, acting as partners of local governments in reducing food losses and waste, with strategic relevance in promoting recovery and redistribution. The main challenge to Foody Zero Sprechi's sustainability lies in consolidating the systematic recovery of surpluses within the agri-food market, ensuring efficient, constant and logistically sound management of fresh products to maximise social and environmental impact.

1.5.1. Discussion

Read together, Foodback and Foody Zero Sprechi show two wholesale markets arriving at a similar solidarity function by different institutional routes — Mercabarna building a dedicated recovery infrastructure outside the marketing circuit, Sogemi repurposing an existing market shop into a hub born out of pandemic necessity. The dialogue used this contrast to probe how much of each model's success depends on the specific market operator's goodwill versus a structural obligation.

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Both cases converged on the same vulnerability: recovery volumes are ultimately dictated by individual wholesalers' internal policies, over which neither Foodback nor Foody Zero Sprechi holds real authority. This pushed the discussion toward governance rather than logistics — participants argued that food waste prevention and surplus redistribution needed to be embedded as structural priorities within urban food policy, with clearly defined roles across public authorities, market operators, wholesalers and Third Sector organisations, rather than left to voluntary cooperation.

The facilitator asked what would make wholesalers active participants rather than passive donors; the group pointed to incentive and compensation mechanisms — fiscal benefits, recognition schemes, operational support — paired with disincentives for avoidable waste, as a more durable lever than appeals to goodwill alone. Digitalisation surfaced as a connecting thread between the two cases: both rely on manual sorting and distribution, and participants saw integrated tracking systems and end-to-end traceability as essential to scaling either model beyond its current, largely improvised footprint. The session focused in on replicability — if Foodback's model could, in principle, be extended to any wholesale market, and Sogemi's hub emerged from a crisis response now worth institutionalising, then the wider opportunity was to treat both not as isolated practices but as templates for a systems-level transition in how European wholesale markets handle surplus.

> **Markets as solidarity infrastructure**
> Both cases repurpose existing public-market assets (a recovery centre; a depot inside the fruit and vegetable market) for social ends. The innovation lies less in technology than in redefining what a wholesale market is for. The dialogue also identified the limit of this redefinition: while surplus volumes depend on individual wholesalers' policies, the model rests on voluntary participation rather than on a structural obligation.

1.5.2. Recommendations

This section presents consolidated policy recommendations from Barcelona and Milan, to support food waste prevention and surplus redistribution, with a focus on wholesale markets and food aid hubs as key infrastructures within urban food systems.

Governance, political commitment and stakeholder engagement

- Embed food waste prevention and surplus redistribution as structural priorities within urban food policies, aligned with the waste hierarchy set out in the EU Waste Framework Directive, prioritising prevention over waste management measures, and supported by sustained political commitment beyond short-term cycles. **[Who should act: City governments; EU institutions]**
- Establish inclusive and coordinated governance frameworks, clearly defining roles and responsibilities among public authorities, wholesale market operators, wholesalers and third sector organisations managing food aid hubs. **[Who should act: City governments; market operators; Third Sector organisations]**
- Ensure multilevel governance alignment, integrating local actions within regional, national and EU food strategies. **[Who should act: Regional, national and EU authorities; city governments]**
- Promote continuous stakeholder engagement and consultation loops, enabling wholesalers and vendors to co-design redistribution strategies. **[Who should act: Market operators; wholesalers]**

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- Foster community engagement, raising awareness and involving local communities in food sharing and surplus redistribution initiatives. **[Who should act: City governments; Third Sector organisations]**

Economic sustainability, incentives and enabling frameworks

- Ensure food waste prevention and surplus recovery are economically viable for all actors along the food chain, including wholesale markets and food aid hubs. **[Who should act: City governments; market operators]**
- Secure dedicated and stable public funding, moving beyond time-limited pilot projects. **[Who should act: City, regional and national governments; EU institutions]**
- Introduce incentive and compensation mechanisms (e.g. fiscal benefits, financial rewards, recognition schemes, operational support) to promote best practices and activate wholesaler participation. **[Who should act: City governments; national authorities (fiscal measures)]**
- Apply a balanced incentive-and-sanction approach, combining supportive measures with disincentives for avoidable food waste. **[Who should act: National and local authorities; market operators]**
- Develop specific and enabling regulatory frameworks for food surplus recovery, tailored to the operational realities of wholesale markets and food aid hubs. **[Who should act: National and EU legislators; city governments]**

Prevention, capacity building and cultural change

- Develop and implement standardised food waste prevention protocols, particularly for handling, storage and transfer of fresh products such as fruit and vegetables. **[Who should act: Market operators; food safety authorities]**
- Strengthen capacity building and training for vendors, wholesalers and hub operators, focusing on product quality, redistribution standards and societal benefits. **[Who should act: Market operators; Third Sector organisations; city governments]**
- Promote a culture of proactive responsibility, encouraging actors to anticipate surplus generation and prioritise prevention and redistribution upstream. **[Who should act: Wholesalers; market operators]**
- Support a cultural and rights-based shift, framing access to good, healthy and sustainable food as a collective responsibility and moving beyond emergency food aid models. **[Who should act: City governments; EU institutions; civil society]**

Digitalisation, data transparency and operational efficiency

- Deploy integrated digital tools and tracking systems linking wholesalers and food aid hubs to enable real-time monitoring of surplus flows. **[Who should act: Market operators; wholesalers; hub operators]**
- Ensure end-to-end traceability of products from wholesale markets to hubs and final beneficiaries, strengthening transparency and accountability. **[Who should act: Market operators; hub operators]**
- Promote transparent, standardised and publicly available food waste data, supported by harmonised indicators and reporting tools. **[Who should act: City governments; EU institutions (harmonised indicators)]**
- Enhance logistics and operational efficiency through rapid collection and redistribution processes, minimising spoilage and losses. **[Who should act: Hub operators; market operators]**

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Systemic innovation, learning and replicability

- Adopt a systems and transition-oriented approach, positioning food waste prevention as a key lever for transforming urban food systems. **[Who should act: City governments; EU institutions]**
- Support pilot projects as experimentation spaces for innovative governance, business, and logistical models. **[Who should act: EU and national funders; city governments]**
- Promote communities of practice involving public authorities, wholesale markets, food aid hubs, civil society and research actors. **[Who should act: EU institutions; networks such as ICLEI and the MUFPP; researchers]**

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Food sharing and social cohesion

Can bottom-up food sharing movements at grassroots level generate a lasting impact? As shown in the Food Sharing Map produced as part of the CULTIVATE project, a strong community of active citizens sustains thousands of FSIs across Europe — yet evidence of how these distributed efforts are recognised and supported by policy at local, national and EU level remains limited.

The World Happiness Report 2025 reports that sharing meals is strongly associated with subjective wellbeing, which is comparable in strength of impact to income and employment status. While its authors also note that existing data cannot establish whether sharing meals raises wellbeing or whether happier people share more meals (De Neve et al., 2025) the positive association is clear. Building on this evidence base, the Utrecht Policy Dialogue sought to examine the contribution of FSIs to social cohesion, to combat loneliness, and to improve health and healthy living environments.

This requires examining the volunteering communities active within FSIs, the target groups they reach, and the role such initiatives play in countering loneliness while fostering social cohesion and intercultural understanding. It is equally relevant to consider the impact of community gardens, healthy school lunches, and nature education on healthy lifestyles and living environments.

The resulting questions addressed in this dialogue are twofold: how can the societal added value of FSIs be better measured and acknowledged, and how can city administrations support these bottom-up movements through policy and political engagement?

1.6. Espigoladors

Place	Catalonia, Spain
Period	Since 2014
Partners	Municipality of Barcelona; PEMB; producers; receiving social organisations; Rezero; ABD-ONG; FOOD4GOOD/University of Barcelona (FARO Observatory)
Scale	3,632 volunteers, 232 producers and 132 receiving organisations (December 2025)
Main challenge	Measuring volunteer wellbeing without burdening volunteers

Since 2014, Fundació Espigoladors has promoted food utilisation and the right to healthy, sustainable food through gleaning — harvesting produce left in fields after the main harvest, historically practiced by those with limited resources and now revived against food waste and vulnerability. Its objectives are to reduce food loss and waste, give vulnerable people access to healthy food, raise awareness of food's value and origin, give visibility to producers' work and difficulties, and build an inclusive social movement around food.

The partnership included Municipality of Barcelona, the Pla Estratègic Metropolità de Barcelona (PEMB), collaborating producers and receiving social organisations, plus Rezero, ABD-ONG, and FOOD4GOOD/Universitat de Barcelona (FARO Observatory) for the wellbeing strand. The initiative

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covers several areas of Catalonia, Spain (Terres de Lleida, Girona, Maresme, El Vallès, the Barcelona Metropolitan Area, Camp de Tarragona and Terres de l'Ebre) and has been ongoing since 2015. By December 2025 the network counts 3,632 volunteers, 232 producers and 132 receiving organisations, having recovered 3.2 million kg of food that year (3,178,765 kg cumulatively), avoiding 277,882 tonnes of CO2 and saving 16,784 million litres of water.

Gleaning's contribution to food sharing goes beyond recovery volumes: it reconnects urban volunteers with agricultural land, and functions as an "awareness multiplier" — 98% of surveyed volunteers share food-waste knowledge with others, 40% report reduced waste at home, 38% a shift toward local or short supply chains. It also feeds targeted initiatives like (S)àvies pel Clima (older women trained as climate educators) and Espais Alimenta, whose evaluation found a 69–100% reduction in food deprivation indicators and zero reported extreme hunger among participants after joining. These are the initiative's own survey and evaluation results and are self-reported; they are indicative of direction rather than independent estimates of effect.

The core challenge is evidentiary, not operational: Espigoladors and PEMB believe gleaning delivers real wellbeing benefits — reduced stress, stronger social bonds, a sense of agency — but lack a shared framework to measure them, even as funders increasingly demand quantified social impact. Heavier data collection risks discouraging the volunteers the practice depends on. This experience shaped the question brought to Utrecht: how to measure gleaning's impact on volunteer wellbeing, and what trade-off between accuracy and participant burden is acceptable before measurement undermines the initiative itself.

1.6.1. Discussion

The conversation centred on the trade-off the case presenters had themselves raised. Participants cautioned against strong quantitative data collection, which would be difficult to achieve without stressing volunteers and could discourage the participation on which the practice depends. Quantitative indicators were seen as useful mainly for responding to funding calls and conveying the scale of impact, but not as the primary basis for evaluation.

The group favoured prioritising volunteers' wellbeing and willingness to take part, collecting data in a more passive way directly at the gleaning site, and setting aside, where necessary, academic requirements for data collection and knowledge creation. A well-chosen set of qualitative indicators was also considered a credible way to capture the scale of gleaning's effect on volunteer wellbeing.

This position has support for wider evidence. The wellbeing benefits attributed to shared meals are well documented as associations, while causal claims remain contested (De Neve et al., 2025), which argues for modest and transparent claims in any evaluation of gleaning. CULTIVATE's Food Sharing Calculator includes a sustainability impact assessment tool, which builds on earlier user-tested work with FSIs (Mackenzie & Davies, 2022). Whether its data requirements are compatible with the light-touch approach favoured at the dialogue is an open question that this paper does not resolve. This topic is explored in *Estimating the Hidden Sustainability Contributions from Food Sharing Initiatives at the Municipal Scale* (Davies et al, 2027*).*

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> Designing evaluation together with the volunteers who are its subjects treats measurement itself as part of the social innovation, not as a reporting task added afterwards. Methods for this are still emerging, and the dialogue produced principles (proportionality, passive collection, qualitative indicators) rather than a tested protocol.

1.6.2. Recommendations

- **Keep evaluation proportionate to the initiative.** Funders and public authorities should calibrate reporting requirements to the size and nature of the initiative and avoid requirements that fall directly on volunteers. **[Who should act: Funders; public authorities]**
- **Favour passive, site-based data collection.** Where data on wellbeing are needed, they should be gathered at the point of activity in light and optional ways, so that participation in the initiative is never conditional on participation in the research. **[Who should act: Initiatives; researchers]**
- **Pair a few shared qualitative indicators with minimal quantitative data.** A short, commonly agreed set of qualitative indicators, supplemented by the minimum quantitative information funders require, can describe the scale of impact without heavy collection. **[Who should act: Initiatives; funders]**
- **Separate accountability evidence from research evidence.** Where academic partners need richer data, collection should be resourced and carried out by the research team rather than by volunteers or initiative staff. Although whether this would reduce demands on participants is questionable, engagement remains vital to understand impacts. Attention needs to be paid to the mechanisms for identifying impact and the type of impacts that are seen as meaningful. This issue raises wider questions around the value given by governments to qualitative narratives, stories and case studies that requires further exploration. **[Who should act: Researchers; funders; public authorities]**
- **Treat self-reported outcomes as indicative.** Behavioral effects such as knowledge-sharing or reduced household waste, reported by participants themselves, should be presented with that characteristic made explicit. This does not mean that they are not meaningful. **[Who should act: Initiatives; researchers; funders]**
- **Build one framework for many initiatives.** A shared, open measurement framework, as developed through CULTIVATE's Food Sharing Calculatorspares each initiative the need to design its own indicators and can be augmented with additional place-based metrics if desired. **[Who should act: EU institutions; CULTIVATE partners and communities of practice]**

1.7. Hub Loreto, Community Kitchen

Place	Loreto neighbourhood, Milan
Period	July 2024 - on-going
Partners	Local parish; solidarity market; Off Campus Provvisorio (Politecnico di Milano living lab)
Scale	Three points in one neighbourhood; the city's first diffused food aid hub
Main challenge	Defining the actors and prerogatives needed for an open, sustainable community kitchen

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Hub Loreto[4] is the first diffused food aid hub in the city. Rather than being concentrated in a single location, it operates through three points within the same neighbourhood: a local parish, a solidarity market, and Off Campus Provvisorio, a living lab of Politecnico di Milano (Fassi et al., 2023; Politecnico di Milano, 2024). The three locations were already active, with existing relationships and activities in the neighbourhood. The Hub therefore builds an existing territorial ecosystem, connecting organisations working not only on food, but also on solidarity, research, relationships and community life. Through the work with beneficiaries and volunteers, the initiative promoters observed how food poverty is interconnected with broader forms of vulnerability, including relational and spatial poverty. This led to framing the challenge around three interconnected needs: lack of food, lack of relationships, and lack of space.

While the Loreto Hub already addresses food poverty by transforming food surplus into a resource, it was explored how food could also become a tool for fostering relationships and creating shared spaces. Together with local partners, the promoters proposed a community kitchen as a space for participation, connection, and community building.

Still, fundamental questions remain open: who are the actors, and what prerogatives are needed to ensure a community-kitchen common that is open, economically sustainable, beyond assistance-based dynamics, and able to empower diverse communities?

1.7.1. Discussion

One of the first points concerned the identity and naming of the place. The suggestion to think beyond the term “community kitchen” and potentially use a concept such as “public kitchen” reflects a broader need to move away from the traditional food-aid narrative. If the place is perceived primarily as a space for people experiencing food poverty, it risks reproducing an assistance-based relationship between providers and beneficiaries. A public kitchen, instead, could be understood as a shared neighbourhood resource: a place that is useful and attractive to people with different economic, social and cultural backgrounds. The aim would not simply be to provide food, but to create a space where food, relationships, and participation come together.

Another important discussion concerned economic sustainability and inclusion. One proposal was to experiment with a cooperative-style subscription system for meals. People with greater economic resources could commit to purchasing a fixed number of meals per month — for example, a minimum of 15 — which they could collect over time. People experiencing financial difficulties could instead access meals through a contribution based on volunteering hours or other forms of participation. This could create a mixed model in which different people contribute according to their possibilities — through money, time or participation — and all participate in the same system.

The objective would be to avoid creating separate categories of “users” and “beneficiaries”.

The group also discussed how the kitchen infrastructure itself could contribute to its sustainability. For example, the kitchen could host evening workshops involving chefs or food professionals. These activities could generate additional income while also bringing different groups of people into the

4Politecnico di Milano. (2024, September 26). SOSpesa entra nella rete Food Hub di Milano [SOSpesa enters the Milan Food Hub network].

place and strengthening their identity as a place for learning, sharing, and social interaction. Finally, the discussion reinforced the importance of thinking about the kitchen as part of a wider territorial network, rather than an isolated facility. The experience of Hub Loreto suggests that existing local organisations can act as complementary nodes, bringing different resources, relationships, competences and communities into the same ecosystem.

> **From assistance to commons**
> This is the clearest case in the dialogues of a proposal that redefines the relationship between provider and recipient, not just the service. The mixed contribution model (money, time or participation) and the "public kitchen" framing are untested ideas; the dialogue itself identified regulation, funding, responsibilities and governance as the barriers that would decide whether they can work.

1.7.2. Recommendations

- **Move beyond the food-aid narrative.** The space should be conceived as a shared neighbourhood resource, rather than a service exclusively for people experiencing food poverty. Concepts such as "public kitchen" could help communicate a more open and universal purpose and avoid reinforcing an assistance-based dynamic. **[Who should act: Promoters; city government]**
- **Reframe the role of food.** Food surplus and redistribution can be the starting point for building relationships, participation and community, rather than the final objective of the intervention. **[Who should act: Promoters; hub operators]**
- . **[Who should act: Promoters; local partners]**
- **Experiment with cooperative contribution models.** A combination of paid subscriptions and contributions through volunteering or participation could allow people with different economic and social backgrounds to contribute according to their possibilities while accessing the same service. **[Who should act: Promoters; local partners; city government (rules)]**
- **Develop multiple revenue streams.** Evening workshops, cooking classes, and collaborations with chefs or food professionals could generate income while simultaneously activating the space and attracting new users. **[Who should act: Promoters; local partners]**
- **Treat the kitchen as multifunctional infrastructure.** Cooking and meal distribution should be complemented by learning, training, cultural, and social activities. **[Who should act: Promoters; local partners]**
- **Build on existing territorial networks.** Rather than creating a completely new structure, community kitchens could connect existing organisations, spaces, and competences within the neighbourhood. **[Who should act: Local organisations; city government]**
- **Clarify governance and responsibilities from the beginning.** Since regulations, funding, responsibilities, and governance were identified as major barriers to implementation, these issues should be addressed during the early stages of co-design rather than once the project has already been defined. **[Who should act: City government; promoters; funders (at the co-design stage)]**

1.8. Utrecht: Healthy Urban Living, including a food sharing narrative

Place	Utrecht

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Period	Narrative presented at the Utrecht Policy Dialogue, 3 June 2026
Partners	Municipality of Utrecht; local food sharing initiatives
Scale	Not reported
Main challenge	Recognising initiatives without taking them over, within the municipality's limited competence

The Municipality of Utrecht hosts a wide range of bottom-up FSIs. Through the CULTIVATE project the municipality learned more about the diversity of these initiatives and the large group of citizens active in them, whose aims include combating poverty, loneliness, food waste and climate change, supporting social cohesion, and strengthening connection with nature, as in the edible neighbourhood with its food forest.
The municipality therefore drafted a new narrative to include food sharing within its Healthy Urban Living policy. Through this narrative, the municipality wishes to increase awareness of the number and diversity of FSIs and of the ways in which they contribute to healthy urban living in Utrecht.

The narrative responds to a gap that CULTIVATE's governance review documents more widely: policy landscapes tend to treat food as a commodity and often do not recognise the sustainability contribution of food sharing initiatives (CULTIVATE, 2024). The benefits attributed to such initiatives span social, environmental and economic domains, from new support networks, wellbeing and confidence to food waste reduction, training and jobs, and reduced pressure on food budgets (Mackenzie & Davies, 2019, as adapted in CULTIVATE, 2024). A first CULTIVATE cost-benefit assessment of food sharing, for Barcelona and Milan, has also been published (CULTIVATE, 2025). Read in this light, the Utrecht narrative can be understood as an attempt to translate the motivations of grassroots initiatives into a vocabulary that city departments already use, namely health, social cohesion and liveability.

The dialogue also heard a presentation on social cost-benefit analysis of food initiatives in Amsterdam (New Economy, 2026), which informed the discussion on how preventive health effects might be recognised.

1.8.1. Discussion

The narrative was pitched during the break-out session for two purposes: to explore whether it could offer recognition for the added value of food sharing, and to create a clearer understanding of the municipality's limited competence in this field. With limited capacity, financial means and competence over food, the municipality is investing mainly in a city deal to push for new legislation that would enable it to build healthy urban living environments without unhealthy food providers or advertising. In other words, the municipality's lever sits mainly in the regulatory domain, not in the operation or funding of initiatives themselves.

Participants engaged actively through critical questions about the narrative and local food policy. Local FSIs welcomed the absence of a strict food policy within the municipality, which allows them to develop and join initiatives that best match their intrinsic motivation. Concerns were also raised about the fragility of depending on voluntary efforts and community leaders, and about the need for a community manager to enable FSIs to collaborate across the city.

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The two views point to a tension that the dialogue did not resolve: initiatives value their autonomy, yet the same lack of structure leaves them exposed to volunteer fatigue and to the loss of key individuals. The relationship between food sharing and food democracy in European cities has been studied before (Davies et al., 2019). The Utrecht discussion illustrates the practical question involved: how can municipalities acknowledge and support food sharing without changing its character?

> **Recognition without capture**
> The Utrecht narrative and the proposed community manager are both attempting to give city-level visibility and coordination to initiatives that are valued for being self-organised. This is a social innovation question in the governance sense: it concerns new relationships between a municipality and citizen-led initiatives, and there is not yet evidence from Utrecht on whether recognition strengthens or alters the initiatives it describes.

1.8.2. Recommendations

- **Further develop the local food policy, financed through a regional funding programme.** A regional funding stream would address the municipality's limited means and allow Healthy Urban Living to carry out a food sharing component without placing new obligations on initiatives. **[Who should act: Regional government; Municipality of Utrecht]**
- **Provide a good overview of the initiatives and bring them together periodically.** A shared, up-to-date map (the CULTIVATE Food Sharing Map is one option) and regular convening would support the collaboration FSIs asked for. A community-manager role was identified as a way to make this sustained rather than occasional. **[Who should act: Municipality of Utrecht; FSIs]**
- **Acknowledge the added value of food sharing and the way it prevents health costs (see Pepijn Duijvestein's presentation).** Social cost-benefit approaches, and tools such as CULTIVATE's Food Sharing Calculator, can give the municipality evidence on preventive effects. Estimates of this kind should be presented as indicative, given the limits of attribution. **[Who should act: Municipality of Utrecht; researchers and cost-benefit practitioners]**
- **Offer support through temporary funds for voluntary efforts and social cohesion.** Short-term, low-bureaucracy funds could relieve pressure on volunteers, provided they are designed so as not to create dependence on municipal money. **[Who should act: Municipality of Utrecht; regional funding bodies]**
- **Protect the autonomy of initiatives.** Recognition and support mechanisms should avoid adding regulatory or burdens, in line with what local FSIs say they value. **[Who should act: Municipality of Utrecht and FSI's]**
- **Pursuing the legislative route for healthy food environments.** The city's deal for enabling legislation, mentioned above, fits the municipality's actual competence and can complement support for initiatives. **[Who should act: Municipality of Utrecht; national government]**

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Food policies as collectors of food-related public services

This document does not contain specific policy guidelines *per se,* but recommendations that can be collected and used for policy purposes. Governing bodies are necessary to help transform distributed FSIs into resilient infrastructures, creating supports that do not change the fundamental value and positive impacts of the initiatives.

CULTIVATE used the three dialogues to trace a single arc around food sharing — its social purpose, the infrastructure that can host it, and the partnerships that can sustain it.

Public-Private Partnerships are a crucial governance model for sustaining urban food waste reduction strategies. Evidence from the case studies suggests replacing reliance on public funds or unstable donations with a resilient hybrid model, built on three strengths: **financial resilience**, through diversified resources — crowdfunding, philanthropy, transition funding — that shield initiatives from political cycles; **strategic efficiency**, as public administrations facilitate shared logistics and hubs that make sustainable procurement viable against cheaper conventional supply chains; and **accountability**, since private engagement follows measurable social impact, keeping outcomes aligned with the public interest. By formalising this facilitator role and rewarding measured impact, PPPs may turn temporary community efforts into lasting, institutionalised solutions that let FSIs flourish across European cities.

Wholesale markets are strategic infrastructures for urban social innovation, leveraging their logistical capacity to lead food waste prevention and surplus redistribution. The success of this model depends on inclusive governance and stable economic support to move beyond emergency aid systems and progress toward an approach based on the collective right to healthy food. Finally, the implementation of digital tools for transparency and European-scale knowledge exchange are essential to ensure these practices are scalable and replicable, driving a systemic transformation of the urban food system.

FSIs also contribute to wellbeing, social connectedness and a sense of agency among volunteers and participants. This is consistent with the World Happiness Report 2025, which points to a positive association between sharing meals and wellbeing, social connection and health. These contributions are harder to evidence than material flows, and the dialogue on social cohesion identified this as a key policy gap. Funders increasingly ask for quantified social impact, yet participants cautioned that heavy data collection can burden the volunteers on whom FSIs depend. They favoured light, largely passive and qualitative approaches over academic-grade protocols. Existing frameworks (Mackenzie & Davies, 2022; Davies, 2026) and social cost-benefit approaches (Cultivate, 2025) may help make this value visible, but the acceptable trade-off between accuracy and participant burden remains open.

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In general terms, inclusive urban food policy governance has the power to support resilient territorial food systems, with municipal actors connecting FSIs to the food-related public services they already run or oversee as well as facilitating connections with the private sector, such as through PPPs. The dialogues point to at least four such connections:

- **Public procurement and markets.** Barcelona's dialogue identified procurement as a possible stable revenue source for community initiatives, and the wholesale market cases showed how an existing public asset can serve as a solidarity function. Procurement is also one of the actions of the Urban Agenda for the EU Food Partnership (see below).
- **Social services and food aid.** Milan's hubs link surplus recovery to social inclusion, and Hub Loreto links food aid to relational and spatial needs, which suggests that food sharing and social services can be planned together.
- **Health and prevention.** Utrecht's work on Healthy Urban Living treats food sharing as a contributor to preventive health, the challenge for replicating this model is a recognition-and-evidence problem more than a funding one.
- **Waste management and spatial planning.** Barcelona's findings on restrictive ordinances and Loreto's "lack of space" both show that rules on waste, commercialisation and land use shape what initiatives can do, and are in the hands of those actors and institutions shaping governance arrangements.

Connecting is not the same as absorbing. The dialogues repeatedly stressed that the value of these initiatives depends on their openness, their volunteers and their local roots, and that it is important not to erode these qualities. A realistic aim is therefore a municipality that links initiatives to its services, while leaving their governance to the people running them.

> **The service system as the unit of innovation**
> At this scale, the claim is that food sharing can be a recognised node in the public service system rather than a parallel, voluntary activity. This claim goes further than any single case in the dialogues. It rests on the combination of cases presented here and on CULTIVATE's wider evidence, and it is better treated as a working hypothesis to be tested than as an established result.

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Food policy connections

The Milan dialogue's clearest working principle was that private engagement follows measurement: without a way to demonstrate social return, partners treat food sharing as goodwill rather than strategy. The Food Sharing Calculator speaks directly to this concern, combining a sustainability impact assessment with guidance on the investment a resilient food sharing landscape requires — translating food waste reduction and redistribution into the quantifiable, comparable terms that build the case for continued private involvement.

Where Milan's dialogue centred on proving impact, Barcelona's centred on what happens when impact is not enough — when a supportive governance structure, not funding or evidence, is what an initiative is missing. The Menu of Good Governance speaks directly to this finding, offering a decision-support tool for policymakers and FSIs navigating the policy environments that determine whether an initiative can move from local experiment to lasting practice.

The Utrecht dialogue asked what food sharing delivers beyond food itself: wellbeing, social connectedness, and a sense of belonging that conventional community-building methods often struggle to reach. The Library of Citizen Engagement speaks directly to this question, offering an open-access collection of engagement mechanisms suited to building the social connectedness of the Utrecht dialogue set out to measure.

The Compass in full

The tools referenced above are part of a broader instrument CULTIVATE has developed: the **Food Sharing Compass**, a set of five tools built for different stakeholder needs (CULTIVATE, n.d.). The **Food Sharing Map** identifies and classifies FSIs across more than 200 locations globally, giving visibility of these activities to policymakers, FSIs, food supply actors, researchers and citizens alike. The **Food Sharing Calculator**, **Menu of Good Governance,** and **Library of Citizen Engagement** are described above. A fifth tool, the **Food Sharing Community of Practice**, closes the loop by giving FSIs a framework for exchanging knowledge, experience and expertise.
The compass framing is deliberate. A compass does not prescribe a route; it lets a user locate themselves relative to others and decide where to go next. The Food Sharing Compass is intended to work in that way at two levels:

Navigating existing experiences. The Food Sharing Map provides a way to visualise food sharing landscapes, in Europe and beyond. The Menu of Good Governance and the Food Sharing Calculator then add two kinds of orientation: the policy options available, and the evidence needed to justify them. Each dialogue connects to one of these tools.

Imagining what is possible. The Food Sharing Community of Practice provides a means to extend the exchanges founded across the Hub and Spoke locations within the CULTIVATE project beyond the consortium, creating pathways for new networks and partnerships to emerge internationally. At the other end of the scale, The Library of Citizen Engagement curates a suite of options that can

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be used to expand food sharing in local places, with bespoke games developed within the project that bring people together in playful ways while making fundamental connections.

> **A platform for replication**
> CULTIVATE itself calls the Compass a social innovation support platform. Its premise is that a practice developed in one city (a hub, a covenant, a measurement approach) can be adapted by another with the help of shared tools and a community of practice. Whether the tools help cities adapt practices in new settings, rather than only describe them, is the question the Spoke-city phase and the Amplification Programme are placed to answer.

Anchoring the recommendations

The recommendations gathered across this White Paper do not exist in a policy vacuum. Milan, Barcelona and Utrecht are all signatories to the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, an agreement signed in Milan on 15 October 2015 by the mayors of more than 100 cities. It now brings together more than 340 cities (MUFPP, 2026). Its Framework for Action contains 44 recommended actions, grouped into six categories — Governance, Sustainable Diets & Nutrition, Social & Economic Equity, Food Production, Food Supply & Distribution, and Food Waste — with indicators to monitor progress on each (MUFPP, 2015). Read against this framework, the dialogues' findings are less a departure from existing commitments than a grounded account of what implementing them requires.

Milan's calls to standardise social impact measurement and to streamline regulation for food aid networks relate to the Framework's Food Waste actions, which include convening food system actors to assess and monitor food loss and waste, and working with the private sector on policies that prevent waste or enable safe recovery. Barcelona's findings on institutionalising practices against political risk, and on restrictive food safety and commercialisation rules, echo the Framework's emphasis on facilitating the recovery and redistribution of surplus food for human consumption, and show what this commitment runs into when a municipal ordinance closes the route. Utrecht's focus on wellbeing and social connectedness relates directly to the Social and Economic Equity category. Its proposals for an overview of initiatives and a community manager also relate to the Governance category, whose actions include identifying, mapping and supporting local and grassroots initiatives and strengthening stakeholder participation (MUFPP, 2015).

A second anchor is the Urban Agenda for the EU Partnership on Food. Launched in January 2024, it brings together 27 stakeholders from different sectors and levels of governance, with the aim of building consensus around shared goals for sustainable food systems and advocating for them at national and EU levels (Urban Agenda for the EU, n.d.). The Municipality of Milan and the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (AML) co-coordinate the Partnership, and the MUFPP is a co-lead (MUFPP, 2025). CULTIVATE is linked to the Partnership through the Municipality of Milan, a Hub city and co-coordinator, and through Lisbon and Dublin, both CULTIVATE Spoke locations represented in the Partnership by the Lisbon Metropolitan Area and the Municipality of Dublin. As well as the University of Barcelona and ICLEI. The Partnership's Action Plan, finalised in September 2025 and explicitly non-binding, sets out seven actions, including advocacy for an EU framework for local food policies, urban food policy training, indicators for urban food systems, public land for local food

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policies, and sustainable public food procurement (Urban Agenda for the EU Food Partnership, 2025). A related policy statement notes that around 75% of the EU population lives in urban areas, yet cities remain largely excluded from EU food policy processes (Urban Agenda for the EU Food Partnership, 2026).

The dialogues' recommendations and the Partnership's actions overlap in four places, which suggest where this paper's findings could feed a wider EU conversation:

- **Procurement.** Barcelona's proposal to use public procurement as a lever for community initiatives corresponds to the Partnership's action on sustainable public food procurement.
- **Indicators and measurements.** The Milan and Espigoladors discussions on impact measurement, and the tension between accountability and burden on volunteers, are relevant to the action on indicators for urban food systems.
- **Training and capacity.** The call for "food champions" and for a community manager role corresponds to the Partnership's action on urban food policy training.
- **EU-level recognition.** The dialogues' repeated requests for EU-level recognition, funding and regulatory clarity are consistent with the Partnership's advocacy for an EU framework for local food policies.

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Conclusion: a cultural shift before a policy shift

1. Why governance needs to be horizontal

Across the three dialogues, the arrangements that held up best were those in which the public administration convened without owning. Stakeholders in the Milan dialogue argued that local "captains" must be part of governance. Utrecht asked whether the city should remain facilitator by default or become one actor among equals, as in Freiburg's Food Policy Council. Utrecht's initiatives also asked for a community manager, not for a stricter policy. Barcelona's La Marga, by contrast, shows the exposure of a practice that depends on one funder and on the goodwill of participating associations.

A plausible reading is that horizontal governance is less a matter of fairness than fitness. FSIs draw their effectiveness from volunteers, local relationships and intrinsic motivation, which hierarchical programme management tends to weaken. CULTIVATE's governance review points the same way, noting limited influence, participation and inclusivity in policymaking as one of the barriers for these initiatives (CULTIVATE, 2024). Horizontal governance also has costs: slower decisions, unclear responsibility, and a reliance on a few committed individuals, which participants themselves flagged as fragile. The dialogues do not show that horizontal arrangements last longer than vertical ones, only that vertical ones alone seem poorly suited to this kind of practice.

2. Accountability that is not only quantitative

The Milan dialogue's working principle, that private engagement follows measurement, is a reasonable starting point, and the Food Sharing Calculator responds to it. The Espigoladors discussion, however, showed its limit: heavy data collection can discourage the volunteers whose participation is the thing being measured. The two positions are less opposed than they appear if accountability is understood more broadly than reporting numbers.

Several forms of accountability appeared in the dialogues without being named as such: the transparency that makes a PPP legitimate, the non-financial recognition proposed for private partners, the covenant's annual evaluation, qualitative indicators chosen with volunteers, and the periodic convening of initiatives. What they share is that those who contribute, and those who benefit, can see and discuss what the initiative does. This resembles the food democracy perspective that has been applied to European FSIs (Davies et al., 2019). The open design question is how to combine such relational accountability with the minimum amount of quantitative data that funders will continue to require, without letting the second crowd out the first. The wellbeing evidence itself is associational (De Neve et al., 2025), which is a further reason to be modest about what numbers can show.

Two arguments from the social sciences support this caution. The anthropological studies collected by Strathern (2000) examine how audit procedures, introduced to secure accountability, can reshape the institutions and practices they assess. Scott (1998) argues that schemes to make local

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practices legible and standardised for administrators often overlook, and can destroy, the practical local knowledge on which those practices depend. Both are general arguments rather than findings about food sharing, but they describe the risk that the Espigoladors discussion identified.

3. Bringing the informal economy into view

Much of what FSIs produce is not captured by conventional economic accounts: volunteer time, donated surplus, informal exchange, and prevented costs in health and social care. CULTIVATE's work on the "hidden" sustainability contributions of these initiatives (Davies, 2027), the Barcelona cost-benefit assessment (CULTIVATE, 2025) and the Amsterdam social cost-benefit presentation heard in Utrecht are all attempts to make that value legible to municipal decision makers.

Making informal value visible carries risks as well as benefits. Assigning prices to volunteer time or avoided health costs can support the case for funding, but it can also invite comparisons with market alternatives, shift expectations towards efficiency targets, or encourage cities to rely on unpaid work. The Loreto proposal of contributing through money, time, or participation in the same system suggests a different route, in which the informal economy is recognised on its own terms rather than converted into market terms. This resonates with the diverse economies approach, which argues that unpaid, informal and non-market activity forms a large part of economic life that conventional, market-centred accounts leave invisible (Gibson-Graham, 2006), and with Graeber's (2011) notion of baseline communism, the everyday cooperation among people on the basis of ability and need. Which route serves initiatives better is not yet known, and the estimates available are indicative.

Taken together, the dialogues suggest that FSIs may be better understood as fostering a cultural change. What the dialogues describe is food sharing that stimulates a change in how food is treated: from a commodity to a shared resource, from beneficiaries to participants, and from service delivery to relationships. CULTIVATE's own review notes that policy landscapes still tend to treat food as a commodity, sidelining understandings of food as a human right or a common good (CULTIVATE, 2024). Policy can certainly enable (or indeed constrain) this change, through the way they shape funding requirements, regulations, recognition and procurement practices, as the recommendations in this paper set out. It is less able to produce it, and the dialogues repeatedly warned that policy actions in the absence of meaningful, inclusive and accountable partnerships with other actors, most importantly with FSIs themselves, can erode the qualities that make FSIs valuable.

This reading has limits. Three dialogues and a handful of cases cannot show that a cultural change is under way, and "revolution" would overstate what the evidence supports. The more modest claim is that policy for food sharing may work best when it follows the culture it supports, and when its measures of success include how people relate to food and to one another, not only how much food moves.

The urbanist Jane Jacobs observed that cities can provide something for everybody "only because, and only when, they are created by everybody" (Jacobs, 1961, ch. 12). The initiatives in this paper can be read as a small, food-shaped instance of that proposition. Her companion argument, that new ideas must use old buildings (Jacobs, 1961, ch. 10), suggests how: by turning existing markets,

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neighbourhood assets and public services into the infrastructure through which food sharing can endure. Haraway (2016) adds that the stories and concepts we think with matter for the worlds we make with others, which is why narrative work, such as Utrecht's, deserves a place beside funding and regulation. If this reading holds, the task for policy is less to design food sharing than to keep the city open to being made by those who share.

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Appendices

Methodology

The policy dialogues are conceived as in-person, half-day deliberative events held in conjunction with the CULTIVATE Marketplaces. Their purpose is to bring stakeholders into thematic discussion so as to raise issues, share perspectives, identify common ground, and move toward agreement or consensus on policy solutions. Participation draws on multilevel policymakers from across the CULTIVATE partnership, the network of local authorities of ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, and the municipalities that have signed the MUFPP, and the dialogues are hosted in the project's three Hub cities — Milan, Barcelona and Utrecht. Their stated end is the development of multilevel action plans capable of transforming the policy architectures and market conditions that shape urban and peri-urban (UPU) food sharing across the EU.

Participation is calibrated to the governance level(s) most relevant to each theme — spanning global, EU, national, regional, metropolitan and urban actors as appropriate — so that the composition of each dialogue reflects the scale at which its issue is actually decided and acted upon, rather than a fixed template applied uniformly across cities.

The resulting outcome is twofold: a summary of each dialogue's substantive findings, and a set of elements feeding into the broader multilevel action plan the project develops across its full set of dialogues.

Each dialogue follows a tripartite format. A plenary opening session situates the discussion: a keynote and short intervention from policymakers and institutional partners to introduce the thematic focus, its sub-themes, and the open questions that will structure deliberation. This is followed by parallel working groups, in which stakeholders engage directly with the identified discussion areas, testing points of convergence, and divergence. The event closes with a plenary synthesis, consolidating working-group insights into elements usable for a multilevel action plan.

Each working group is structured around the challenge launched by the case study and fosters active participation leading to concrete recommendations. Three groups of 12–15 participants each sat in a circle for 45 minutes, which creates a horizontal and inclusive environment. Using simple materials — post-it notes, markers, flipcharts and mind-mapping tools — participants visualised ideas and connections. Facilitators guide the conversation to ensure every voice is heard; discussions stay on track, and constructive critique is welcome. Each dialogue begins with a case study–specific question and, when needed, expands to broader reflections. By the end, every group formulates at least three actionable recommendations, validated with the case study presenters and shared in the plenary session to synthesise insights and collective perspectives.

A limitation should be noted. The discussion sections in this paper are reconstructed from facilitators' and note-takers' records, and in some cases from presenters' recollections, rather than from verbatim transcripts. They report what was raised and where groups converged and should not be read as representative of the wider sector or as outcomes of formal voting.

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Programmes

Milan · 13 October 2025	Barcelona · 31 March 2026	Utrecht · 4 June 2026
The policy dialogues outlook: Matteo Matteini, Municipality of Milan CULTIVATE in a nutshell: Anna Davies, Trinity College Dublin The Menu of Good Governance: Ana Moragues, Amaranta Herrero, University of Barcelona Keynote: Diego Valazza, Lendlease; Mauro Capitanio, Principia Case study 1: La Marga, Giulio Cappadona, PEMB Barcelona Case study 2: The Covenant, Linde Leenhouts, Miriam Weber, Municipality of Utrecht Case study 3: Food Aid Network, Teresa Materia, Municipality of Milan Group facilitators: Ana Moragues, University of Barcelona; Jessica Duncan, Wageningen University & Research; Lorenza Sganzetta, Municipality of Milan Note takers: Irene Fabricci, ICLEI; Amaranta Herrero, University of Barcelona; Katia Alarcón, ICLEI	Institutional welcoming: Ingrid Buera, Mercabarna The policy dialogues outlook: Giulio Cappadona, PEMB CULTIVATE: the Food Sharing Compass: Leonardo Improta, ICONS Keynote: Raquel Diaz, Fundació Espigoladors Case study 1: Foodback-Mercabarna, Milagros Paseta, Mercabarna Case study 2: Foody-Sogemi, Fernando Zaffra, Foody Case study 3: Utrecht case study, Miriam Weber, Municipality of Utrecht Group facilitators: Jean-Marc Louvin and Katia Alcorcón, ICLEI Note takers: Nicoletta Gomboli and Chiara Poggia, ICONS	Words of welcome: Ronald Venderbosch, Director Healthy Urban Living Impact Assessment & Tools: Jenny Lyons, Trinity College Dublin Social Costs & Benefits Analysis in Amsterdam: Pepijn Duijvestein, New Economy FSIs & Healthy Urban Living: Miriam Weber, Municipality of Utrecht Hub Loreto, Community Kitchen: Irene Bassi, Municipality of Milan Measuring Without Burdening: Raquel Díaz Ruiz, Municipality of Barcelona Signing Ceremony, Plant Based Treaty: Dennis de Vries, Municipality of Utrecht Group facilitators: Miriam Weber, Municipality of Utrecht Note takers: Jean-Marc Louvin, Irene Fabricci and Katia Alarcón, ICLEI

Policy dialogues in numbers

	Milan	Barcelona	Utrecht
Policy dialogues	1	1	1
Speakers	10	7	7
Staff	7	5	3
Participants	49	55	44
Countries	10	6	10
External to the CULTIVATE-consortium	16	30	12
Women	33	37	27
Policymakers	6	10	10

Tools

Questionnaire. A questionnaire is shared with city representatives at the initial stage:

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What is the name of your practice?
Please describe your practice shortly, including key information like objectives; partners; period; place; and duration (1000 characters max)
How did your practice help to make your food recovery and redistribution ecosystem sustainable? (500 characters max)
How sustainable is your practive? (scale 1-5)
How scalable is your practice? (scale 1–5)
How replicable is your practice? (scale 1–5)
What is the main challenge for the sustainability of your practice? (500 characters max)

Presentations.

Keynote presentations served as the strategic anchor for each event. They are high-level speeches delivered by recognised experts, policymakers, or stakeholders, designed to set up the tone, frame the core issues, and inspire constructive debate among participants.

Case study presentations provide the real-world "how" after the keynote's big picture vision. They offer concrete proof of concept by showing what happened when an initiative was implemented or attempted. They ground abstract debates in reality, expose practical operational hurdles and challenges, and provide scalable lessons (both successes and failures) for other policymakers to replicate or avoid.

Facilitation & note-taking guide.

A short kit is provided to standardise the methodology and create coherent outcomes. It includes instructions for the set-up and structure, to lead and guide the discussion and capture insights and patterns.

Survey.

The satisfaction survey is distributed to participants after the session:

How satisfied are you with today's Policy Dialogue overall? (scale 1–4)
The group discussions helped me exchange ideas and learn from others. (scale 1–4)
The format (case study, facilitation, timing) worked well for me. (scale 1–4)
Anything else you want us to know? (open)

Key remarks from the survey:

- The format is appreciated since it is short, inclusive, interactive, and not too formal.
- The main theme, sub-theme, and challenge narrative provide a fast framework for everyone to contribute.
- The topics were relevant.
- The facilitation style is flexible and adapts tools to the occasion.
- The diversity of participants adds value.

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Key suggestions from the surveys:

- More time for discussion would allow deeper thinking.
- Keeping solely focused on the subjects would make the sessions more productive.
- Written feedback after the policy dialogues conclude would be appreciated.
- Providing case study briefs beforehand would save time.

Reports. One analytic report and one short report are made available for each Policy dialogue. One white paper, this document, encompasses the complete policy dialogues experience.

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