

Municipal Prefiguration: How Creative Politics Can Shape Urban Foodscape Governance

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Abstract

As the horizon for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development draws nearer in an increasingly urbanised world, questions remain about how urban governance can promote a more just and resilient food system. Municipalities are often tasked with the local implementation of national policies, a form of top-down governance. However, municipalities can also engage in bottom-up governance by cooperating with alternative food networks (AFNs) to influence, for example, the city’s political agenda. Thus, investigating the dynamics of municipalities and AFNs in bottom-up governance is crucial to explaining and supporting urban food system transformation. This article explores how municipalities can act as agents of “prefigurative politics”—enacting the values and practices of ideal, contested food futures. Drawing on interviews and participant observations in Malmö, Sweden, we show how the municipality supports local AFNs and actively participates in their development. These practices reveal how municipalities negotiate power, cultivate diverse relationships, and embed alternative temporalities of change within urban food governance. By examining the municipality’s role in the establishment of the Malmö Food Council, this article advances debates on how municipalities can contribute to post-2030 urban food agendas. Using prefiguration as an analytical lens to understand how power operates across scales of governance, our analysis reveals how municipalities can become sites where future food systems are not merely planned and governed but also imagined, enacted, and negotiated in the present. It also reveals the challenges and limitations facing municipalities in working towards a just and resilient food system.

Keywords

alternative food networks; experimental governance; food democracy; food policy councils; food systems transformation; grassroots organisation; prefigurative politics; social movements

1. Introduction

1.1. Food Systems Transformation

The call for increased action to transform food systems towards sustainability has become a common point of departure for research on environmental and health sustainability, exemplified by the EAT-Lancet reports (Gibson et al., 2026; Rockström et al., 2025). Furthermore, the term “sustainability” has been widely used to denote adherence to the three pillars of sustainability (i.e., environmental, economic, and social dimensions) as per the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Despite the ubiquitous adoption of this underlying interpretation of the term, the three pillars are highly contingent on historical and political contexts (Redclift, 2005). Following this, the nature of sustainability and approaches towards sustainable development should be acknowledged as contested (Purvis et al., 2019).

We contend that sustainable development should be transparent about two key factors: firstly, the interconnected and interdependent relationship between social and environmental equity (Hopwood et al., 2005), and the inherent issues of relying on economic growth to solve the global climate crisis (Purvis et al., 2019; Redclift, 2005; Schmelzer & Nowshin, 2023). Taking these factors into account, we address sustainability from an urban perspective, highlighting the role of municipalities in sustainable development (Bulkeley, 2010). By exploring municipal bottom-up activities that support local grassroots initiatives, this article suggests that municipal actors can be understood as experimenting with a form of “prefigurative politics” (Boggs, 1977) for sustainable urban development.

Urban contexts play a key role in sustainable development (Bulkeley, 2010; Edwards et al., 2024). As the foremost agents of local governance, municipalities are often tasked with implementing national policies at the local level. Hence, municipalities can be considered as acting top-down in a local context, translating policy into practice. However, municipalities can also engage in bottom-up politics by collaborating with grassroots initiatives to influence, for example, the city’s political agenda (Chinaglia & Duncan, 2025). Thus, investigating the dynamics of municipalities and grassroots initiatives in bottom-up governance is important for explaining and supporting sustainable urban development.

Municipalities can play multiple roles in supporting and collaborating with grassroots initiatives, and are uniquely positioned at the intersection of both top-down and bottom-up political processes (Conti et al., 2025). Furthermore, the need to navigate temporal dimensions of local governance that entail participatory engagement with incumbent and emerging actors, while framing their activities within the more permanent organisation of formal and legal democratic frameworks, has invited the exploration of collaborative and experimental types of governance (Kronsell & Mukhtar-Landgren, 2018; Voytenko Palgan et al., 2021). When municipalities align their vision with local grassroots initiatives, for example, “alternative food networks” (AFNs), they are more likely to improve conditions relating to public health, community development, and sustainable land use (cf. Laycock Pedersen & Nicholas, 2026).

Conversely, if the priorities of local governments are misaligned with local AFNs, e.g., by incentivising entrepreneurship over community-building, municipalities risk shifting their responsibilities onto individual citizens, hindering communities from engaging in sustainable food provisioning (Chinaglia & Duncan, 2025; Wallinder, 2026). Furthermore, experimental forms of governance have enabled some municipalities to play

a key role in supporting local AFNs by addressing their foremost challenges: securing funding for collaboration and increasing public perception of the legitimacy of initiatives (International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, 2017; Kronsell & Mukhtar-Landgren, 2018). However, municipalities may also undermine the influence of AFNs by, for example, limiting their access to local spaces (Chinaglia & Duncan, 2025). As such, collaborative and experimental governance are particularly relevant when investigating municipalities' engagements with AFNs to support or obstruct the transformation of local food systems (Edwards et al., 2024; Kopczyńska et al., 2026).

1.2. Alternative Food Networks

"Alternative food network" (AFN) is an umbrella term for a diverse range of approaches to food production, distribution, and retail, centred on offering alternatives to the conventional food system. Such alternatives include farmers' markets, direct marketing schemes, community supported agriculture, box schemes, community gardens, and food cooperatives (Harris, 2010, p. 355). The discourse around AFN activities has developed from highlighting how "quality" was differentiated from conventional practices (Goodman, 2003) and how the "alterity" of AFNs was defined (Whatmore et al., 2003) to an emphasis on the role of "place" (Harris, 2009; Sonnino & Marsden, 2006). In critical assessments of how "local" was operationalised in both discourse and activism related to AFNs, scholars argued for a "re-localisation" in which local food strategies were interrogated in light of local power relations (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005).

Another key development from early AFN studies was the departure from the binary view of alternative versus conventional and the adoption of "hybridisation." This means that AFNs rarely exhibit a purely alternative model to their conventional counterpart, but rather adopt hybrid solutions effectively mixing conventional and alternative approaches (Maye, 2013). The hybrid configuration adopted by AFNs and the types of alternative economic practices they enact are instrumental to understanding the role of AFNs in food systems transformation (Bååth & Fuentes, 2025; Fuentes et al., 2026; Rosol, 2020). However, so too are questions of governance and intermediary support of AFNs that go beyond promotion and actively support the development of AFNs in terms of fostering "fairer, more equitable and democratic, and more sustainable ... food systems based on solidarity" (Rosol & Barbosa, 2021, p. 1036).

Municipalities may support the development of AFNs for food system transformation to a systemic level, which is essential for such transformation to gain momentum (Kopczyńska et al., 2026; Wahlen et al., 2024; Zoll et al., 2024). Thus, highlighting the question of what form such practices may take, and how involved actors can manoeuvre and maintain the relationships created in the process of improving locally anchored food system transformation. This question is important to answer in the search for leverage points to improve policy integration and effectiveness (Den Boer et al., 2021; Edwards et al., 2024). Furthermore, it may contribute to a better understanding of how such relationships enhance the democratic dimension in local food systems by confronting issues of justice and resilience in food system transformation (Candel, 2022; Tribaldos & Kortetmäki, 2022; Zurek et al., 2022). The emphasis on justice and resilience in food system transformation is often referred to as "food democracy" (Lang, 1999).

Food democracy refers to the demand that food systems benefit all people equally and offers a lens for comparing public and private interests in, for example, food policy (Lang, 1999). In the context of this article, we specifically refer to a grassroots-anchored type of food democracy, sometimes called "strong food

democracy,” which “articulates a critical counter-model that emphasises inclusive deliberation” (Behringer & Feindt, 2019). Recent studies have highlighted the importance of understanding variations in engagement with AFNs, which are increasingly recognised as instrumental to understanding the transition pathways available for food systems governance (Edwards et al., 2024; Kopczyńska et al., 2026; van Bers et al., 2019). Others have proposed useful frameworks for assessing how municipalities engage with AFNs (see, e.g., Emanuel et al., 2026; Voytenko Palgan et al., 2021).

This article focuses on specific aspects of such engagements that not only demonstrate innovative approaches to supporting AFNs but also signal a new paradigm for “food systems governance”—that is, “processes and actor constellations that shape decision-making and activities related to the production, distribution and consumption of food” (van Bers et al., 2016). This is important, as it shows the mutually beneficial outcomes for transforming food systems that can be achieved through local government collaboration and support for AFNs engaging with food democracy. Investigating, nuancing, and experimenting with innovative approaches to the relationship between AFNs and food systems governance have been identified as gaps in extant research (Candel, 2022; Clark et al., 2021; Edwards et al., 2024; Forno et al., 2026).

The purpose of this article is to contribute to understanding how municipalities support local AFNs in ways that align with AFN aspirations, such as food democracy. To do this, we looked at processes that inform municipal actions undertaken in support of AFNs working towards a vision of a transformed (sustainable) food system. Through a case study of the local food council in Malmö, Sweden, we identified processes that invited further exploration of the varieties of collaborative and experimental governance and how they were employed to realise a future goal in the present. Therefore, we sought to answer the question: How can municipal actors engage prefiguratively to support a local transition to a more sustainable food system?

2. Theoretical Framework

Prefigurative politics refers to small-scale practical politics that experiment with and test out ideologically desired futures. It emerged as an explanatory theory for how and why social movements enact participatory democracy, sometimes to the detriment of systemic change (Breines, 1980). The relationship between direct action and bureaucracy is an underlying tension within prefigurative politics, which this article examines in the governance of local AFNs.

Conceptualising interactions between grassroots initiatives and municipalities as a governance dimension of prefigurative politics has been explored in multiple avenues of sustainable urban development (see, for example, Sareen & Juhola, 2026). A fundamental conceptual point supporting this idea is that prefigurative politics and conventional politics (i.e., politics carried out by political parties, political organisations, and individuals in line with representative democracy) can be mutually reinforcing (Bertolini, 2025; Monticelli, 2021), with some scholars suggesting that the dichotomy of conventional and prefigurative may indeed be superfluous (Maeckelbergh, 2016). Such synergetic hybridity of convention and alternative is not unique to politics in AFNs, as it has also been identified in their markets (Bååth & Fuentes, 2025). We thus refer to the hybrid of convention and prefiguration as “municipal prefiguration” (i.e., not a novel form of prefiguration).

As the analysis examines more in detail, the delicate power dynamics inherent to this process stem from the iterative conditions created by pressures on municipal actors. Such pressures come from political mandates, policies, and national government institutions and by relational as well as community-supportive conditions from the local electorate. These iterative conditions further highlight the transformational role municipalities play when considering their position at the interface of top-down and bottom-up processes (Conti et al., 2025). A related topic is the role of bureaucracy and organisation of grassroots action in these contexts. While prefigurative politics largely rejects conventional political praxis and organisation (Graeber, 2013), some bureaucratic structures have been suggested to enable prefiguration (Kaufmann & Danner-Schröder, 2025).

Furthermore, investigating the processes used by public officials through prefigurative politics advances the link between transition studies and social movement theory, as proposed by Törnberg (2018), since different contexts may enable or disable pathways for municipal actors to engage with prefiguration toward the outcome they envision. It is worth noting that extant studies of regulatory compliance and management in the Swedish food system tend to meet comprehensive bureaucracy with creativity and pragmatism, particularly among actors tasked with implementing policy in practice (Bååth & Nilsson, 2024; Blix Germundsson & Bååth, 2026). Prefigurative politics helps explain how such pragmatism may be combined with political visions of a sustainable future by addressing the practical realisation of these visions through policy enactment and development.

The question of the boundaries of prefiguration has prompted scholars to define what constitutes prefigurative action in practice (Maeckelbergh, 2016; Schiller-Merkens, 2022; Yates, 2015). By juxtaposing prefigurative and “anticipatory” politics—i.e., the use of future narratives by national governments to maintain the status quo (Anderson, 2010)—Jeffrey and Dyson (2021) identified three constituent dimensions of prefigurative politics: improvisation, institutionalisation, and impact.

We adopt Rut and Davies’s (2024, p. 5–6) definitions of the three dimensions. “Improvisation” is a strategy for testing solutions and enrolling whatever materials are available to prefigure the outcomes desired. “Institutionalisation” refers to processes that “[strengthen] individual, collective and societal resources for participation and establishment of cross-sectorial and cross-regional collaborative ties.” Furthermore, it requires that new skills and knowledge be embedded in everyday practices. “Impact,” lastly, is intimately related to institutionalisation, as impacts follow from strengthened ties and embedded skills and knowledge. Together, these dimensions explain how prefigurative politics emerge and gain influence in organising and decision-making, here through the hybrid politics of municipal prefiguration.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Case Study

To explore municipal engagement with AFNs and the prefigurative aspects of their support of multiple visions for a future food system, this article uses the establishment of the Malmö Food Council (MFC) as a case study. Therefore, a brief contextualisation of Malmö City in Sweden is important. The argument can be made for Malmö as a symbol of urban sustainability, characterised by the modern transformation of its industrial heritage, as evidenced by its numerous sustainability awards (see Leander et al., 2021).

Malmö offers a context in which such experimental and creative modes of governance have been extensively implemented over a long period (Voytenko Palgan et al., 2021). The fact that Malmö also has a vibrant food movement with multiple active AFNs makes the city a relevant case for assessing the political processes involving grassroots movements and local governance in food sustainability (cf. Laycock Pedersen et al., 2023).

3.2. Data Collection

The material for this article was collected between January and November of 2025. Drawing on multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) and inspired by the ethics of participatory action research (PAR), qualitative interviews and participant observations were conducted with participants from municipal bodies and local AFNs in Malmö, Sweden. This is a conventional approach for examining the practical experiences of participants in local AFNs (e.g., Bååth, 2022, 2024; Fuentes et al., 2026). The fieldwork included attending, e.g., urban living labs, organisational planning meetings of local initiatives, as well as food-related workshops and events involving the municipality.

The materials include transcripts from five qualitative interviews on collaborative and experimental governance in general, and on the process of experimenting involving municipal actors and local AFNs. The interviews were conducted with members of the MFC, the municipality, and local AFNs. Additional data were generated in the form of field notes from participant observations and online sources such as social media posts, media coverage, and public websites.

We draw on PAR ethics, which emphasises the role of researchers as responsible actors for supporting social change. Core principles are relationship-building, establishing a common understanding of the problem under investigation, and collaborative analysis (Cornish et al., 2023). For this study, this meant that the materials used was discussed and reviewed by all study participants during fieldwork before the submission of the final version. There are many hallmarks of PAR ethics, and while the fieldwork aspired towards “research *with, for* and *by* people rather than *on* people” (Bradbury & Reason, 2003, p. 171), we do not intend to suggest that the research upholds all the facets of PAR ethics.

3.3. Data Analysis

To structure the analysis, inspiration has been drawn from the theoretical framework of prefigurative politics, developed by Rut and Davies (2024) from Jeffrey and Dyson’s (2021) original theory, which compartmentalises prefigurative politics in three dimensions: improvisation, institutionalisation, and impact. There were many accounts of prefigurative politics occurring at multiple levels of engagement between the municipality and local AFNs. However, some actions are sensitive for the interlocutors if shared publicly. As such, we have aimed for a balanced representation of pedagogical examples and narrative clarity, while cutting anything inappropriate. The material was initially coded into types of collaborative actions that occurred between the municipality and AFNs, e.g., workshops, lectures, urban living labs, and public events. Subsequently, the codes were compared against the three dimensions. Quotes have been translated from Swedish into English.

4. Municipal Prefiguration

The transition of Malmö's food system requires a close relationship between local institutions and their surrounding communities and AFNs, as the small, locally based businesses and organisations have very limited financial capital yet high levels of social capital, passion, and innovation. It also requires a mutually beneficial urban-rural relationship and support for young aspiring food producers to enter the job market. Still, municipal silos hinder collaboration towards local progress on environmental and social sustainability. One participant described the political climate for sustainable development like this:

I think that they [elected politicians] have pulled out of the whole thing. They don't want strategies anymore. They want smaller groups working with small interventions. But it takes so long to anchor anything strategically, and they do not dare to. I believe that there is a lack of courage. (Participant 4)

To improve Malmö's food sustainability—both social and environmental—public officials are left to seek inspiration and help from others and find creative solutions to solve the political standstill. During our fieldwork, we encountered several examples of such creative solutions. However, one case stood out as particularly interesting and relevant for exploring the role of prefiguration within local governance: the creation of a food council.

4.1. Creating the Malmö Food Council

The establishment of the Bristol Food Policy Council in 2011 had a great impact on people working with food and sustainability in Malmö. With the increased grassroots interest in food policy councils following the establishment of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact in 2015, it was no coincidence that public officials looked to forming new networks as a key step towards food sustainability.

When Sweden's first national food strategy was released in 2017, many local actors expressed the need for a local strategy to complement and better serve the city's unique conditions and inhabitants. But not everyone was convinced that it would sufficiently address what was sorely missing from both extant policy and public discourse around food sustainability. What was missing was citizen engagement and "collective action," as Malmö City called it in their publication *Handbook on Collective Action* (Salminen & Bruun Blauert, 2018).

Based on the reasoning that a network of stakeholders might be more appropriate for advancing the agenda of using food as a tool to improve local conditions for social and environmental sustainability, the Environmental Department sought project funding to investigate the feasibility of a local food policy council in Malmö. They were granted funding by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development in 2019 for the Food Malmö project, through which a network of food-sustainability stakeholders was assembled to learn about food councils and disseminate information on food and sustainability. An early project statement read: "We believe that a food council is the most effective way to create the best conditions for a visionary, future-oriented, and vibrant food city" (Food Malmö, 2020).

From this statement, we can infer that the organisational form, that is, the council itself, is not separate from the goal. A more deliberative and inclusive food system, based on democratisation of the mode of governance, is imagined through the establishment of a food council. As such, it can be thought of as a way to strengthen

bottom-up structures rather than relying on the predominant, conventional, top-down structure of local policy implementation. One of the co-founders elaborated on the gap in food governance that the council filled in a similar way:

To pass the torch onwards *out into the city* to those who have the ability to expand it. That is where I see our role. That we scale the value by collaborating, *through* mobilisation, so that we can help expand [the food system transformation]—also for the municipality. (Participant 2)

As such, this co-founder explicitly positions the role of the council as one that actively engages to counter municipal silos, advocate the food issue, and promote the AFN activities within the city through the mobilisation of AFNs and municipal actors.

By late 2020, the MFC was established, with the aim to “elevate Malmö’s rich and vibrant food culture to new heights by bringing together stakeholders from various sectors who view food as the key to a sustainable future” (MFC, n.d.-b). Thus, we would argue, the relations presumed necessary for collaborative transformation of the food system were forged within a safe space of the municipality’s project. This contrasts with ordinary municipal strategies and actively challenges the “ways of doing things” in line with other prefigurative practices (Törnberg, 2018).

4.2. Exploring Prefiguration and the MFC

Since its inception, the MFC has initiated and coordinated projects, activities, and events centred on supporting and promoting a transition towards sustainable urban and rural food systems in and around Malmö. An early initiative was the digital education tool *Matologi* (Foodology), which began as a pilot initiative by the Food Malmö project that aimed to teach children about sustainability and food by inviting all five senses to partake in the individual and collective understanding, appreciation, and experience of food and taste (MATtanken, 2022). The council also operates a Food Incubator programme supporting food entrepreneurs and sustainable business development. As such, the MFC can be understood as a food-system intermediary and governance actor that facilitates, incubates, coordinates, and scales AFNs (cf. Rosol & Barbosa, 2021). Rather than being an AFN or AFN node, it maintains a multi-stakeholder platform that unites mainstream actors from public authorities and the private sector with actors from AFNs to collaborate towards sustainable development.

4.3. Improvisation: Dissemination Strategies and Networking for Food Democracy

The initial project had to rely on its participants’ ability to solve issues on an ad hoc basis. As disseminating information through in-person meetings, seminars, and workshops was a main goal, the project participants were forced to shift to online formats following the restrictions imposed during the Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020. This affected the *Matologi* initiative too, as its initial format incorporated physical primary school lectures and farm visits, integrated into the curricula of home and consumer studies. Instead, *Matologi* was reconfigured as a digital learning tool consisting of eight thematic, interactive educational films (MFC, n.d.-a).

The dissemination of transformative change in social movements has been highlighted as a common function of prefigurative politics (Diesner & Scholl, 2026), and the participants’ adherence to these activities further

strengthen this claim. To adapt to the new circumstances, they had to improvise solutions to continue their dissemination activities, akin to other examples of prefigurative improvisation “from testing solutions and monitoring practices to the enrolment of multiple spaces, people and materials in their activities” (Rut & Davies, 2024, p. 5).

Through experimentation with prefigurative improvisation, the project participants were empowered to investigate how such prefigurative activities could otherwise be pursued. This will become clear when we see how the prefigurative improvisation becomes institutionalised.

4.4. Institutionalisation: From Municipal Project to Non-Governmental Organisation

Following the success of Matologi, the question surfaced of how to continue a project that co-founders deemed “too good to put back into the drawer” (Participant 1). Remaining within the bureaucratic confines of the municipality was not necessarily going to secure the emerging organisation’s deliberate democratic structure. One participant expressed it like this:

Municipal bureaucracy is like a wet blanket on many things...So, it felt like much more freedom of action...and autonomy [to become a non-governmental organisation]. It should be moulded by the members. In a democratic fashion. Otherwise, it will just become a municipal matter. (Participant 3)

This showcases an awareness of the power dynamic inherent in the role of a public official. They can only do so much in favour of a certain issue. But with that awareness and experience, pathways can be created for incremental improvement towards systemic change. By activating experimental, creative, and collaborative governance (Voytenko Palgan et al., 2021), such as project networks, workshops, and living labs, prefigurative improvisation was realised by gathering like-minded individuals seeking to support and disseminate food democracy. In turn, prefigurative politics are often at risk of co-optation by, for example, the local government (Törnberg, 2021), as reflected in the quote above. The limited ability of municipal officials to engage with prefigurative politics, and their awareness of this limitation, sparked an important realisation: The food council should not have to answer to the government.

By surveying the local food community and listening to engaged stakeholders, the public officials involved realised that the best way to support local food system transformation was not only to create a food council but to establish it as a non-governmental organisation (NGO). This decision was made to allow for greater autonomy and flexibility to support (potentially) radical action.

The decision to decouple the council from its governmental ties has played a significant role in its institutionalisation, as it diminished the risk of the council’s values and visions being co-opted by the government. Additionally, as an NGO, the council can play a more influential role in long-term changes to the local food system by engaging in prefigurative, “strategic experiments” (Diesner & Scholl, 2026, p. 367). Conversely, the council’s power to influence policy was likely diminished by its lack of embeddedness within the local government’s institutions. However, the interviews suggested that the ongoing political stalemate over sustainable development in Malmö may have influenced the choice to develop the MFC’s influence through autonomy rather than formal institutionalisation within government. In lieu of political will, the independent MFC could act as an incubator for innovative solutions to unsustainable food practices, a “free space” for prefigurative practices to be trialled (Törnberg, 2018, p. 89).

Furthermore, as an autonomous organisation, the council makes it easier for other municipal actors, such as the City Executive Office, to join or collaborate with it. By 2025, MFC had grown to include 150 members, with numerous recurring annual events, thereby becoming a pillar of the Malmö “foodscape” (Vonthron et al., 2020; Yasmeen, 1996) and a prime exemplar of institutionalised prefiguration.

4.5. Impact: A Multi-Stakeholder Platform for Food Activism

The Environmental Department has a history of engaging in project-based activities to carry out its tasks. This plays a significant role in facilitating the development evident in the formation of the MFC, which should be seen as a long-term outcome of a series of pilot studies and projects. Many projects may fail to sustain their longevity beyond the project period and deliver long-term impact. However, the Environmental Department's experience in project management suggests it was well equipped to navigate novel barriers, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, and likewise address the long-term needs of Malmö's inhabitants through a coherent, structured process. A participant working at the Environmental Department elaborated on this strength:

As a municipal organisation, we are quite unique...We work a lot with co-financed projects. It's our go-to, kind of...Is there anything we would like to do to work towards the Environmental Program's goals?...Then one must network and find the contacts necessary. (Participant 3)

The skillset derived from the experience of a project-oriented approach provided the Environmental Department with tools to use whatever resources at hand (improvise), to initiate and develop an innovative idea, and institutionalise it (despite an ongoing pandemic). They thus established a new local entity that brings together a diverse range of experts and stakeholders to support efforts to improve the sustainability of the local food system. According to the interviews with public officials, the individuals at the Environmental Department were uniquely qualified to support the prefiguring of a food council.

Other public officials who joined after the creation of the NGO are exploring the potential of an intra-municipal network to connect public officials who could potentially work together towards urban sustainability. One public official emphasised the importance of such a network when describing the current possibilities for intra-municipal collaboration for sustainability:

It is very hard for us to collaborate. Even we public officials who work with similar questions—it is almost like we are left to find our own contacts and networks and kind of build something from the bottom up to get this big investment [in sustainable development]. (Participant 4)

Importantly, we define this as an impact of municipal prefiguration, and not an example of another municipal prefiguration. The reason is twofold: As it stands now, the informal network in question caters only to public officials and excludes AFNs from participating; additionally, it is an indirect outcome of the institutionalisation of the MFC.

Municipal prefiguration, as we define it here, is a vehicle between municipal actors and the AFNs, exemplified by the municipality prefiguring a food council, then realising the risk of co-option and thereby changing the MFC into an NGO, effectively making it more democratic and more aligned with AFN values and goals.

From the material presented above, we deduce that the spread of networks to improve conditions for municipal actors to work towards long-term goals of urban sustainability relates in several ways to public officials' ability to engage in experimental and collaborative governance. These engagements can in some cases be understood as prefigurative action by municipal actors. In our case study, municipal prefiguration can be seen to directly improve the municipality's ability to support local AFNs (by prefiguring, but not co-opting, a food council) and indirectly by igniting further networking to facilitate increased support for AFN goals (i.e., breaking silos that hinder food systems transformation).

5. Discussion

With the increased focus on transitioning local food systems, new efforts to enhance sustainability across both social and environmental dimensions are emerging. To emphasise the bottom-up support for AFNs, that is, the enactment of experimental and collaborative governance through prefigurative politics, our material suggests that, in certain contexts, municipal actors engage in prefigurative improvisation. These improvisations, when coupled with emancipatory visions for a different world than the present one, can become institutionalised without forfeiting top-down political mandates or co-opting bottom-up visions, thereby fostering a holistic approach to sustainability. To conceptually distance municipal actors from social movement activists, we termed these processes "municipal prefiguration." In the material presented in this article, municipal prefiguration serves as a vehicle between constitutional and prefigurative politics (cf. Bertolini, 2025; Maeckelbergh, 2016; Monticelli, 2021).

The Environmental Department's engagement and development and the MFC's continuation of the Matologi initiative demonstrate how improvised strategies can serve as building blocks that strengthen the identity and purpose of nascent bottom-up initiatives and set the trajectory for further community engagement (cf. Andreola et al., 2026). As such, Matologi represents a hybrid form of municipal innovation and the promotion of AFN values, aiming to incorporate food democracy into food system governance.

The MFC symbolises modes of sustainable urban development within local food governance that aspire towards inclusivity in decision-making and actively seek collaborations with AFNs across geographies (i.e., Malmö and Söderslätt). This connects with the demands for justice and inclusivity from the food democracy movement (Candel, 2022; DeLind, 2011; Forno et al., 2026) and the ambition to foster mutual decision-making and shared meaning among buyers and sellers in AFN markets (Bååth, 2022, 2024; Bååth & Fuentes, 2025; Fuentes et al., 2026).

Malmö's food-focused sustainable urban development over the last decade has incorporated lasting formal networks, such as the MFC, as well as informal networks made up of public officials who share a similar vision for Malmö's foodscape and work to break down silos within municipal structures. As one of our participants suggested, these silos simultaneously hinder effective governance support for AFNs (including local start-ups and up-and-coming entrepreneurs working towards food sustainability) and complicate collaboration and experimentation within the municipality. This further suggests that municipal prefiguration is not simply an improvisational tactic when creative solutions are necessary but rather entails a specific form of institutionalisation and an impact on the context in which it plays out. This is to say that it can be understood as a strategy towards doing things differently "within the logic of existing societal solutions and institutions" (Törnberg, 2021, p. 88).

Furthermore, municipalities are well-positioned to safeguard grassroots movements by supporting AFNs without co-opting their ideas and social innovations. Additionally, food councils have been documented to be strong allies of AFNs and food democracy values (see, for example, Andreola et al., 2026; Rosol, 2020). Overall, it is important to keep in mind that this is a context-sensitive interpretation: Other urban contexts may present entirely different circumstances that challenge the ability to safeguard grassroots movements.

In Malmö, the MFC was conceptualised by municipal actors first and foremost; if the municipality tries to fit grassroots aspirations into its existing strategies and structures, it may have the opposite effect, weakening grassroots initiatives (Wallinder, 2026). Municipal prefiguration, in itself, is no guarantee against co-option and needs to be either engaged at the grassroots level or endorsed by grassroots initiatives. Otherwise, it risks becoming an appropriation of community engagement and co-option of deliberate democratic progress (see de Wilde & Duyvendak, 2016 for an exposé of co-optation by municipal prefiguration).

In this sense, municipal prefiguration can strengthen relationships between local communities and the municipalities that govern them, as it allows municipal actors to engage with local initiatives, whether by participating in forums and conferences or in co-creation events and workshops. In fact, municipalities should engage in such activities, e.g., living labs, as they foster networking that helps AFNs scale in relevant ways (Kronsell & Mukhtar-Landgren, 2018; Wahlen et al., 2024).

5.1. Limitations of Municipal Prefiguration

When the Environmental Department identified the creation of a food council as both the means and the end of a transformed food system aligned with food democracy values, it was initiating a strategy to strengthen bottom-up over top-down structures in food system governance. This relates to discussions on prefigurative organisation and the difference between radical and reformative strategies.

Recent research on prefigurative organisation has identified more radical versions of such strategies that aim to strengthen bottom-up over top-down structures as “dismantling structure” (Kaufmann & Danner-Schröder, 2025, p. 311). While the chosen strategy and goal of the founders of the MFC may not have been radical enough to constitute a full dismantling of structures, their intentions and aspirations may help us define the practical limits of radical action available to public officials. After all, they are, just as much as any other change actor, “conditioned by the institutions that they wish to change” (Martí & Fernández, 2013, p. 1217).

That is to say, the balancing act between political mandate and doing what is best for the city’s inhabitants necessitates the ability to navigate beyond the known structures of government bureaucracy to realise long-term goals, such as sustainable transformation of the food system. Bureaucratic structures are intricately connected to, and can play an important role in, prefigurative politics (cf. Graeber, 2013; Kaufmann & Danner-Schröder, 2025).

This leads us to the question of the limitations of municipal prefiguration. Municipal prefiguration, on the one hand, makes conventional politics less constraining for local governance actors by enabling public officials to be creative in seeking solutions to long-term issues when such solutions are anchored in grassroots action. On the other hand, the fact that municipal actors are unable to engage fully with prefigurative politics leaves their version of prefiguration much less radical and dissolves the “real utopian”

emancipatory character of prefigurative politics in social movements (Schiller-Merkens, 2022; Wright, 2011). Following Maeckelbergh (2016), we understand this tension in line with the problematic of separating prefigurative politics from conventional politics.

In other words, the limitations of municipal prefiguration are important boundaries to address and discuss. However, they should not be seen as arguments against the concept, but rather as analytical guides to be combined with other contextual elements such as place (DeLind, 2011; DuPuis & Goodman, 2005), actor-network dimensions (Whatmore & Thorne, 1997), and experimental governance (Chinaglia & Duncan, 2025). Taken together, these analytical guides can help us to understand what is being prefigured, where, by whom, and why.

In our case study, a food council was prefigured. Therefore, we can only say that, in governance contexts such as Malmö, non-governmental food councils seem to be a successful implementation of prefigurative politics by municipal actors in support of grassroots-anchored organisations. We cannot claim to know whether food councils need municipal prefiguration to come about, or whether municipal prefiguration can be successful at achieving any other means of grassroots-anchored support.

5.2. Theoretical Implications and Further Research

This exploration of prefigurative politics extends the concept to include municipal actions to further the prefigurative goal of realising a radically different food system. It reinforces the importance of the prefigurative perspective in understanding political agency, social movements, and the culture of resistance more broadly by showcasing its relevance and diversity. Furthermore, it shows that the heuristics developed by Jeffrey and Dyson (2021) can be fruitful beyond traditional grassroots applications to investigate the scope and potential of prefigurative politics in a broader context, while maintaining their insight that prefigurative politics typically emanates from various forms of improvisation.

The creation of a local food council and the development of sustainable local food system transformation can be seen as prefigurative explorations that connect multiple levels of food system governance, bridging prefigurative and institutional politics (Bertolini, 2025; Maeckelbergh, 2016; Monticelli, 2021). This highlights the question of what differences exist between municipal actors' and AFNs' use of prefigurative politics. Following Feola's (2025) invitation to reconsider the role of deconstruction within prefigurative politics, it would be valuable to further investigate whether, and in what ways, prefigurative activities within local governments meaningfully incorporate a refusal of capitalism. As we have shown in the statements issued by Food Malmö, municipal actors can promote bottom-up rather than top-down structures, but the question remains open as to whether this is the limit of radical deconstruction available to them.

This might also improve our understanding of the underlying processes that drive the different pathways of prefigurative social change (see Törnberg, 2021) by showing the extent to which municipal actors can build alternatives. As Yates (2015, p. 19) presents it, building alternatives to the current state of affairs qualifies as prefiguration only if the actions incorporate the consolidation and diffusion of the political messages underlying the alternatives. Put differently: To what degree can municipal actors endorse radical alternatives to the incumbent regime, and how is the ability to engage in prefiguration constrained by the official political agenda?

We need to better understand the prefigurative process in relation to bureaucracy. If bureaucratic structures are resisted (Graeber, 2013), yet do not necessarily hinder prefiguration (Kaufmann & Danner-Schröder, 2025, p. 302), what conditions may turn bureaucratic structures into bridges towards prefiguration? Conversely, if such structures are barriers, how are they deconstructed to realise the prefigurative goals? Ultimately, municipal prefiguration may help discern the presumed (but perhaps illusory) dividing line between conventional and prefigurative politics (Maeckelbergh, 2016; Monticelli, 2021).

6. Conclusion

This article shows that the Malmö municipality engages with local AFNs in a collaborative and experimental effort to realise multiple contested visions of a more sustainable and just food system, which we term *municipal prefiguration*. By prefiguring a food council and subsequently turning it into an NGO, the Environmental Department identified the boundaries of the municipality's capacity to support food systems transformations. The municipality's role as a legitimising and trustworthy agent in building a network and funding projects led to the realisation of a food council, and the municipality's inherent bureaucracy and politically sanctioned mandates limited its ability to support AFNs and promote food democracy, leading to the decision to turn the council into an NGO.

We investigated and analysed these processes by tracking the progression of activities across improvisation, institutionalisation, and impact (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021). From this, we conclude that municipal prefiguration can maintain the grassroots perspective while legitimising prefigurative ideas about the food system and disseminating food democracy.

Our aim was to understand the municipal processes that support AFNs in transforming the food system towards sustainability. The question we sought to explore was how public officials engage in prefiguration to support the transformative aspirations of local AFNs. The contexts examined in this article demonstrate the ability of municipal actors to engage in prefigurative politics, albeit in a limited form, given their position between bottom-up and top-down processes. Furthermore, municipal prefiguration strengthens the proposition that prefigurative politics and conventional politics can be mutually reinforcing (Monticelli, 2021).

As such, the main takeaway is that while local government officials are required to follow the politically mandated direction, priorities, and goals, they are uniquely positioned between top-down and bottom-up processes in interpreting and applying policy locally. This in-between position creates a somewhat ambiguous space for operationalising political goals into practical, quotidian activities. It is in this space that we find the potential for a type of grassroots support that, in certain contexts, allows public officials to act "as if" multiple future ideal scenarios were *de facto* realities. That is, public officials may engage in processes with a long-term sustainability impact that goes beyond the concurrent political mandate.

In practice, this means that, in the space between top-down and bottom-up processes, public officials are entrusted with interpreting and implementing official policies and regulations in ways that align with the realities of the communities with which they engage. Municipal prefiguration is a vehicle keeping both processes coherent in specific contexts. As with prefigurative politics in social movements, variation and context dependence are crucial to understanding how prefiguration can be realised (see Yates, 2015). For example, food councils elsewhere may not need to, nor wish to, become NGOs to engage meaningfully in alternative food politics and need not be prefigured in the first place.

The question remains open as to the degree to which municipal officials engage in the same kind of prefigurative politics practised historically by social movements and activists. In the limited scope of our material, we can see that the process of acting “as if” several desired futures are already manifest can bind conventional politics and prefigurative politics in ways that align the former more closely with the lived realities of communities, while the latter becomes less radical.

The ability of public officials to engage prefiguratively could enable local governance of sustainable urban food development, contributing to overall progress aligned with emancipatory and just development. Such prefiguration requires the experience and knowledge to discern when to use formal and/or informal networks (such as intra-municipal networking versus public-private networking). Additionally, municipal prefiguration concerns the ability and power of municipal actors to engage in creative and experimental governance that extends beyond their office desks and into the urban and rural communities of their constituency. Finally, if municipal actors are empowered to proactively support grassroots initiatives, the inclusive and reflexive politics sought by DuPuis and Goodman (2005) may be evident in municipal prefiguration.

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Conflict of Interests

Jonas Bååth serves on the board of Malmö Food Council. He was considered and elected for this position after the conclusion of the fieldwork. He did not interview any of the MFC members participating in the study.

Data Availability

The qualitative data underlying this study consist of interview transcripts that cannot be made publicly available due to ethical restrictions and the lack of participant consent for public data sharing. To protect participant anonymity, only the selected, pseudonymised quotations integrated into the article text are available; these were reviewed and approved for publication by the participants.

LLMs Disclosure

The corresponding author acknowledges using Grammarly to assist with proofreading at the drafting stage and editing for spelling and grammar before submission to journal. The tool was not used to generate original scientific content, analyse data, or formulate arguments. The corresponding author reviewed all automated suggestions, retained full control over the final wording, and thus take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the work.

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