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From Policy to Practice: Tracing the Evolution of Urban Food Policies Across London and Rotterdam

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Abstract

Urban food policies (UFPs) have emerged as key instruments for addressing food system challenges at the municipal level, often framed by scholars as tools for fostering sustainability, inclusivity, and resilience. However, these policies do not exist in a vacuum; instead, they are shaped by the broader governance landscapes in which they are embedded, such as increasing city gentrification and branding. This article critically examines the evolution of UFPs in London and Rotterdam—two early adopters of UFPs in Europe—exploring how each city's approach to food governance has shifted over time in response to political leadership, funding structures, and local priorities. Employing critical discourse analysis, this study investigates the language and priorities embedded within these policies, revealing persistent tensions between market-driven objectives and sustainable, community-focused solutions. By situating UFPs within their broader governance context, this study contributes to critical debates on urban governance: It questions whether municipalities have the capacity to implement transformative food policies or whether they remain constrained by the structural dynamics of the global food system governed by corporate imperatives.

Keywords

discourse analysis; food governance; food justice; neoliberal governance; sustainability; urban food policies

1. Introduction

Cities are increasingly under pressure to address food-related challenges due to global developments that are challenging conventional practices to feed the urban environment. With more than half of the global population now living in cities (Kundu & Pandey, 2020), the vast quantity of food required to meet urban demand poses an increasingly urgent series of issues. These include the environmental impact of industrial

food production (Ritchie et al., 2022; Sala et al., 2017), resource scarcity exacerbated by unsustainable agricultural practices (Holt-Giménez, 2019), and fossil fuel dependency linked to long-distance food transportation (Lang & Heasman, 2015). Additionally, corporate power concentration is affecting small farmers, increasing their vulnerability within global food supply chains (Clapp, 2021). Furthermore, hunger and malnutrition remain grave concerns worldwide, whilst diet-related chronic diseases have surged, resulting in an epidemic of obesity and overweight among both adults and children and exacerbating public health costs (Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN et al., 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic has also laid bare the vulnerability of both global and national food systems, with restrictions on mobility and imports severely affecting food production and supply chains and exposing agribusinesses limited adaptive capacities (Béné, 2020; Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, 2020). These vulnerabilities have since been compounded by geopolitical conflicts, particularly the war in Ukraine, which disrupted global grain supplies and escalated food insecurity in import-dependent nations (Hussein & Knol, 2023). These interconnected global challenges have increasingly captured the attention of scholars and civic leaders, who have proposed solutions aimed at transforming urban food systems into more sustainable and equitable configurations.

Since the early 2000s, especially in Europe, urban-level food policy experiments have appeared in various forms and names including urban food strategies, food policy councils, food charts, and food action plans, collectively constituting what has been described as the "urban food policy trend" (Cretella, 2016). As tools for addressing food-related challenges, urban food policies (UFPs) have become a focal point in academic literature, with growing attention to their emergence and their capacity to transform urban food systems (Zhong et al., 2021). In particular, the most popular area of research converges on food re-localization, with a strong focus on neighbourhood and city-scale case studies (Keegan et al., 2024). Much of this research highlights a "need to move away from a global, 'industrialized' food system to a more local (or 'alternative') one" (Harris et al., 2015, p. 64). As will be further discussed in the next section, UFPs are generally portrayed as local efforts in opposition to the challenges just described and are positioned as effective tools to counterbalance the negative impacts of the industrialised, globalised food systems.

This specific trend reflects a broader shift in urban governance, where cities are increasingly portrayed as key actors in addressing global challenges such as climate change, resource scarcity, socio-economic inequalities, and public health crises. Scholars argue that this prevailing narrative—encapsulated in the claim that "everyone thinks cities can save the planet" (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020, p. 1)—positions cities as innovative problem-solvers, uniquely equipped to tackle these interconnected crises (Tzaninis et al., 2021). However, some scholars noted that such localised approaches often transfer the burden of addressing systemic global challenges onto municipalities without adequately addressing the power imbalances and entrenched inequalities that underpin these issues (Janos, 2020; Keil, 2020). UFPs exemplify this broader shift, representing city-level attempts to mitigate global food vulnerabilities through local interventions. According to DuPuis and Goodman (2005), the optimistic framing of localised food initiatives—including UFPs—stems largely from a scholarly tendency to view the "local" as a site of "alternative" resistance and innovation, in contrast to the "global," often portrayed as the "mainstream" realm of "neoliberal" imposition and control.

It is around this dualism—between UFPs as alternative, sustainability-driven projects and their entanglement with neoliberal governance frameworks—that this article positions its analysis. Through a discourse analysis

approach, this article critically examines how these two frameworks have been articulated in policy narratives in Rotterdam and London. By tracing the evolution of these narratives, this study aims to contribute to current debates on the role of cities in food governance, the influence of discourse in shaping urban regeneration, and the extent to which UFPs could function as tools for systemic transformation.

2. Established Discourses in the UFP Literature

UFPs are understood in this article as written policy documents that aim to problematise and address challenges within urban food systems. The focus of this article on policy documents addresses a gap in the existing literature: limited attention has been paid to the discursive construction of UFPs over time, particularly the ways in which policies articulate goals such as sustainability, equity, and economic growth. Whilst the concept of UFPs is often elusive—for example, most studies in this field do not endorse a specific definition of the term—authors tend to broadly mobilise it to refer to urban processes where diverse actors come together to transform food systems (Moragues-Faus & Battersby, 2021). Whilst UFPs often engage with governance mechanisms and institutional arrangements, this article does not directly evaluate these operational dimensions nor their practical outcomes. Instead, it aims to critically examine the language, priorities, and ideological underpinnings articulated in UFPs.

Such an approach is essential because much of the existing scholarship on UFPs has been predominantly celebratory, portraying them as inherently progressive tools. Scholars frequently highlight UFPs as democracy-enhancing initiatives, emphasising their focus on participation, social inclusion, reflexivity, and collaboration—qualities often contrasted with conventional, top-down urban governance models (Sonnino, 2019). Reed and Keech (2019), for instance, suggest that urban food actions enhance democratic engagement through institutional support for civic-led, grassroots food initiatives. Maye (2018) adds that UFPS may offer a viable alternative to mitigate the technocratic and neoliberal structures that characterize contemporary "smart cities." Others frame them as "alternatives" to "neoliberal" governance (Ilieva, 2017; Wiskerke & Viljoen, 2012). More specifically, UFPs have been presented alongside specific narratives of social and environmental justice, active citizenship and the "greening" of the food system (Hebinck & Page, 2017; Reed et al., 2018).

Thus, much of the research surrounding UFPs adopts a "benevolent and unproblematic" framing (Tornaghi, 2014, p. 552). This optimistic perspective has shaped an academic focus on researching specific case studies, highlighting opportunities for cities to learn from one another and offering practical insights into diverse urban initiatives (Deakin et al., 2016; Hawkes & Halliday, 2017; Magarini & Porreca, 2019; Moragues et al., 2013; Reed et al., 2013). However, these studies offer limited evaluations of the actual impacts of UFPs, either because "monitoring and evaluation is, in the vast majority of cases, lacking" (Hawkes & Halliday, 2017, p. 97) or because "it is too early to assess how successful these will be in reshaping the dominant food system" (Sonnino, 2019, p. 6). Yet, even recently, as Marino et al. (2024, p. 1) observe, many UFPs have yet to undergo any form of evaluation—whether interim or final—despite scholarly efforts to develop frameworks for assessment. This ongoing gap highlights a critical challenge for UFPs research: Whilst much has been theorised about their transformative potential, limited empirical evidence exists to substantiate these claims, leaving their actual impact uncertain.

Against this backdrop, less attention has been paid to the unintended or potentially exclusionary dynamics of UFPs, as well as their interactions with existing policy, planning, and governance structures. For example, whilst UFPs may prioritise sustainability and inclusivity discourses, these goals often coexist with neoliberal governance logics that prioritise market competitiveness, economic growth, and urban branding (Cretella, 2019; Smaal et al., 2021). Rather than framing these dynamics as a dichotomy between "positive" and "negative" elements, it is more productive to view UFPs as sites of tension where competing discourses and priorities intersect. For instance, framing citizens as consumers may align with neoliberal urban governance strategies but conflict with grassroots aspirations for participatory and inclusive policymaking. These interactions suggest that UFPs are complex governance tools shaped by the interplay of multiple forces.

This article seeks to move beyond rigid dichotomies by critically examining how UFPs articulate and negotiate such competing priorities. Drawing on the literature discussed in this section, which has extensively framed UFPs within a dualistic narrative of "alternative" versus "neoliberal" governance, UFPs are understood in this article as embedded within broader institutional and political contexts, where policies simultaneously challenge and reproduce competing discourses. These competing discourses, outlined in Table 1 in the next section, provide both a conceptual and methodological framework for analysing UFPs. Alternative discourses prioritise participatory decision-making, local food systems, equity-driven sustainability, and redistributive, democracy-enhancing processes (Ilieva, 2017; Kramer et al., 2024; Moulaert et al., 2005; Renting et al., 2012). In contrast, neoliberal discourses are characterised by market-oriented governance, urban competitiveness, privatisation, the commercialisation of urban agriculture, and the positioning of citizens as consumers (Brenner & Theodore, 2003; McClintock, 2014; Sager, 2011; Sternberg, 2023).

3. Methodology

This study employs critical discourse analysis (henceforth CDA) to examine UFP documents from London and Rotterdam, specifically London's series of Food Strategies (Greater London Authority [GLA], 2011, 2018; London Food, 2006) and Rotterdam's Food and the City Initiative (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2012). These two cases were selected for their pioneer role in UFPs as well as for their sustainability approaches: the London Food Strategy (henceforth LFS) has been praised for its ambition to "feed a world city" (Reynolds, 2009), whilst Rotterdam's focus on urban agriculture sought to position the city as the "most sustainable world harbor city" (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2011, p. 75).

CDA has been widely used to analyse policy narratives in food policy research (Bonnevera, 2024; Cretella & Buenger, 2016; Horton, 2024; Knezevic et al., 2014). Drawing on these methodological approaches, this study applies CDA to explore how UFPs construct meaning and reinforce or challenge dominant narratives. By comparing these four documents this analysis traces the initial ambitions behind each city and examines whether—and how—their objectives and discursive framing have shifted over time. By building on the theoretical discussions outlined above, this study identifies two dominant discourses in Table 1—alternative and neoliberal—as methodological tools for analysis. As will be discussed in the remainder of this article, these discourses are not necessarily mutually exclusive but often intersect within UFPs, reflecting the complex governance processes underpinning urban food systems.

Table 1. Alternative and neoliberal discourses in UFPs.

Feature	Alternative	Neoliberal
Core Values	Inclusivity, sustainability, equity, and collaboration	Market-driven logic, efficiency, competitiveness, and privatisation
Governance Approach	Bottom-up, participatory decision-making involving multiple stakeholders, including civil society and grassroots groups	Top-down governance led by public-private partnerships or dominant state actors, often with minimal public engagement
Role of Citizens	Active participants and co-creators in decision-making	Consumers or clients in a market-oriented system
Primary Goals	Social and environmental justice, redistribution of resources, and fostering local resilience	Economic growth, urban branding, inter-city competitiveness, and attracting investment
Policy Orientation	Focus on local food systems, agroecology, reducing inequalities, and enhancing community resilience	Commercialisation of urban agriculture, culinary tourism, start-up culture, and corporate partnerships
Examples in UFPs	Creation of food policy councils, support for urban agriculture, and community-based food hubs	Framing food as an economic opportunity, policies promoting culinary tourism, and partnerships with agribusinesses
Key Critiques	Risk of being fragmented or underfunded, and reliance on voluntary work or ad-hoc funding	Exclusion of marginalised communities and overemphasis on economic goals at the expense of social and environmental ones

CDA provides a method to analyse how such discourses shape policy narratives and governance arrangements: It is a tool to uncover underlying power dynamics, ideological positions, and potential contradictions in the framing of environmental policies (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). Its primary objective is to reveal how language operates within political contexts, influencing both individual practices and collective values (Fairclough, 2013; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). This approach is often used in examining public policy embedded within neoliberal frameworks, where it illuminates how public narratives on sustainability are constructed (Isoaho & Karhunmaa, 2019). However, CDA considers discourse as more than language: It encompasses the social, political, and institutional frameworks that shape and are shaped by communication practices. Or, to use Hajer and Versteeg's (2005, p. 175) words, discourse is "an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices."

This study follows Fairclough's model of CDA, applying a selective and qualitative approach to the analysis of UFP documents (Fairclough, 2013). Rather than exhaustive coding of all texts, the analysis focuses on critical interpretation, exposing discursive patterns and tensions within the documents' policy frameworks (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). Each UFP document was assessed for quotes that represent either "alternative" or "neoliberal" dimensions according to our table, identifying recurring patterns and points of tension. For example, phrases that frame citizens primarily as consumers or that emphasise economic competitiveness may signal the influence of neoliberal frameworks, whereas participatory language might align with alternative logics. The integration of the discursive categories outlined in Table 1 facilitates a systematic exploration of this interplay.

Whilst CDA provides a systematic method for examining policy texts, it is inherently interpretive, and it may be influenced by the researcher's perspective. This study does not claim, indeed, to provide an exhaustive and unilateral analysis of all relevant texts. Instead, it focuses on these documents as representative case studies to explore how UFPs articulate competing priorities. Another limitation of this study is that the focus on policy documents excludes other forms of discourse, such as media or stakeholder interviews, which could offer complementary insights.

4. CDA in London and Rotterdam

4.1. Governance Context of London and Rotterdam

To contextualise the analysis of UFPs in London and Rotterdam, it is essential to situate these initiatives within the broader governance frameworks that characterise these cities. Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on market-driven approaches, economic competitiveness, and the commodification of public services (Brenner & Theodore, 2003; Sternberg, 2023), has profoundly influenced urban governance in both the UK and the Netherlands. This context could contribute to the shaping of the ways in which UFPs are conceptualised, implemented, and operationalised.

In the UK, urban governance has been significantly influenced by neoliberal restructuring since the 1980s. This period marked a shift towards privatisation, deregulation, and entrepreneurial urbanism, wherein cities are positioned as competitive entities vying for investment and economic growth. Such reforms have not only prioritised market-oriented strategies in urban planning but have also entrenched inequalities by privileging private sector interests over community-led initiatives (Imrie, 2003). London, in particular, exemplifies these dynamics, with its governance frameworks focusing heavily on inter-city competitiveness and branding, often at the expense of more equitable forms of urban development (Raco & Kesten, 2018; Swyngedouw et al., 2002).

Similarly, Dutch municipalities have experienced significant neoliberal influences, particularly in the areas of urban regeneration and housing policy. Since the 1990s, the Netherlands has witnessed a shift towards market-oriented and financialised systems of housing and urban planning, with increasing reliance on private actors to drive policy and development agendas (Van Gent & Hochstenbach, 2020). Rotterdam—as one of the country's largest cities—has embraced these neoliberal trends, focusing on urban branding and gentrification to become the "capital of cool" by attracting investment and tourism. These strategies, however, have been criticised for exacerbating social exclusion and marginalising vulnerable communities, reflecting a broader tension between economic growth and social equity (Custers & Willems, 2024).

Rather than existing as isolated or purely alternative initiatives, UFPs thus operate within policy landscapes that often prioritise neoliberal logic and urban competitiveness. In Section 4.2, these tensions and intersections in the selected policy documents will be explored, providing a foundation for the CDA in the subsequent section.

4.2. LFS: From Vision to Implementation

A critical milestone in the UK's food policy history was the launch of the LFS in 2006 (London Food, 2006). Initially conceived under Mayor Ken Livingstone, this pioneering policy marked the first capital-led food strategy in Europe, establishing food as a municipal governance issue focused on public health, food access, and local production. The LFS sought to address rising obesity rates, food insecurity, and the environmental impact of food systems, promoting local agriculture and community engagement as strategies to increase food resilience (Reynolds, 2009).

The LFS evolved notably as the leadership then transitioned from Boris Johnson to Sadiq Khan. Under Johnson (GLA, 2011), the policy used the 2012 Olympics as a platform to position London as a global leader in sustainable food practices (Cretella, 2015). When Sadiq Khan assumed office in 2016, the LFS took a slightly different turn. The 2018 LFS shifted focus more toward public health and equity, with initiatives targeting childhood obesity, restricting junk food advertising across transport for London, and introducing food poverty action plans for local councils (GLA, 2018). In 2023, an updated implementation plan was released to address shifting priorities and reflect progress made since 2018.

Crucially, the LFS has enjoyed a continuity of funding, policy support, as well as a dedicated food team. This dedicated team, a rare commitment to food policy at the city level, has strengthened food's profile as a policy issue and reinforced food's role within urban governance (Parsons et al., 2021). By balancing different dimensions, the LFS demonstrates how UFPs can adapt across different political mandates, enhancing understanding of how such policies can sustain and evolve over time.

4.3. Neoliberal and Alternative Discourses in the LFSs

The document *Healthy and Sustainable Food for London: The Mayor's Food Strategy* (herafter London Food, 2006) was officially launched in May 2006. The stated aim of this document is to "ensure London has a food system that is consistent with the Mayor's objective that London should be a world-class, sustainable city" (p. 9). This statement exemplifies a dual discourse: on the one hand, alternative values of sustainability and equity are emphasised "Healthy and Sustainable"; on the other, the positioning of London as a "world-class" city reflects a neoliberal focus on urban branding and competitiveness.

The six strategic priorities, outlined in the 2006 strategy in the following order—commercial vibrancy, consumer engagement, procurement power, regional links, healthy schools, and waste reduction (p. 12)—demonstrate the interplay between discourses. For example, the positioning of "commercial vibrancy" as the first objective prioritises economic goals and signals a market-driven governance logic, reinforced by statements such as:

> Food tourism is an increasingly vital element of London's attraction for visitors. It has many of the best restaurants in the world, and an unparalleled choice of cuisine. Ensuring this diversity is enhanced and quality continually improved will add to the attractiveness of London as a place to live and do business. (p. 2)

At the same time, the strategy aligns with alternative discourses by addressing food insecurity and public health challenges, particularly for vulnerable populations:

> Obesity and diet-related illnesses account for a huge number of premature deaths in London, with many on low incomes suffering disproportionately. In many parts of London, people struggle to access affordable, nutritious food. Many of those involved in the food system are barely benefiting from it economically, and the environmental impact of the food system is considerable. (p. 2)

The governance approach outlined in the 2006 strategy also exemplifies a neoliberal logic through its reliance on the private sector, as well as consumers and voluntary organisations to implement food system improvements as the strategy states:

> The cost of improvements to London's food system cannot be met by the public sector alone. It will be vital to maximise the input and impact of the private sector, as well as voluntary organisations and, of course, individual consumers, on an equitable and enduring basis. (p. 103)

Under Boris Johnson's leadership, the 2011 strategy (GLA, 2011) built on the 2006 framework but leaned perhaps more heavily towards neoliberal priorities. For example, the strategy states:

> Feeding a city of millions is a mammoth 24-hour operation supporting hundreds of thousands of jobs, nurturing enterprise and pumping billions of pounds into our economy. Our culinary attractions—from street markets to specialist shops to Michelin-starred restaurants—are essential ingredients of the city's unrivalled cultural scene. (GLA, 2011, p. 5)

This focus on enterprise and economic vibrancy reflects an urban branding logic, hallmarks of neoliberal governance. At the same time, alternative goals such as environmental sustainability and food security are acknowledged: "We face significant challenges to ensure access to decent, nutritious, affordable food is universally available to all Londoners, irrespective of income or location. We must also ensure that the food system treads with utmost care on the environment" (GLA, 2011, p. 5).

Further tensions emerged under Johnson, particularly in the alignment of community-based initiatives with corporate sponsorships during the 2012 Olympics (McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Sodexo, and Heineken). For example, the Capital Growth project—aiming to create 2,012 new community food growing spaces for London by 2012 and linked to the Olympics—promoted grassroots engagement but relied heavily on volunteerism, reflecting a reliance on ad-hoc funding mechanisms (Cretella, 2015, p. 9).

The latest LFS launched by Mayor Sadiq Khan in 2018 highlights social equity and environmental goals more prominently than previous iterations. The mayor "want[s] every Londoner to have access to healthy, affordable, good food—regardless of where they live, their personal circumstances or income" (GLA, 2018, p. 5). Nonetheless, neoliberal priorities persisted, particularly in the framing of food's role in urban regeneration and economic growth: "Food can bring high streets back to life, protect the environment, boost tourism and attract inward investment" (GLA, 2018, p. 5).

Discursively, the 2018 LFS leans more toward "alternative" priorities, such as inclusivity and sustainability, whilst showing a more pragmatic approach to what can realistically be achieved through municipal governance. This pragmatism is evident in the Mayor's recognition of the limitations of his own power in statements such as: "The Mayor will do all he can to help tackle" or "not everything that can be done to improve…is within the Mayor's powers, but we can work with partners to achieve more," on various food-related issues (GLA, 2018, pp. 11, 28). These claims suggest a shift from previous, more celebratory rhetoric present in the previous food strategies—such as the idea that cities are able to "save" the food system—towards a grounded acknowledgement of limited capacity and shared responsibility and multi-sectoral, diffuse food governance.

The strategy particularly recognises that food governance spans beyond the local level. Khan's reference to Brexit, which was impending at the time, illustrates this awareness of the national and supranational factors impacting London's food system:

> This London Food Strategy is being published in a time of great uncertainty, with the details of Brexit still not agreed. The London Resilience Forum is working hard to ensure disruption is minimised, but this can't be done in isolation. That's why I'm calling on the Government to ensure that the impact of Brexit on food is fully considered and that measures are put in place to protect this delicate and complicated system. (GLA, 2018, p. 5)

Thus, the 2018 strategy represents a shift toward pragmatic and cooperative ambitions in contrast with earlier iterations, which leant more heavily on market-driven governance frameworks and public-private partnerships. As such, the LFSs are revealed as sites of discursive negotiation, balancing competing priorities. The 2006 and 2011 strategies leant more toward neoliberal governance, emphasising economic growth, urban branding, and entrepreneurial opportunities. In contrast, the 2018 strategy shifted more focus toward alternative priorities, particularly equity, sustainability, and public health. However, neoliberal framing persists, particularly in the economic language that is used to justify policy interventions, illustrating the ongoing tension between competing governance logics.

The effectiveness of the Mayor's goals in addressing London's food challenges remains mixed as the city continues to face persistent inequalities and external pressures. Nowadays, the cost of the food crisis recently highlighted by the London Assembly has worsened food insecurity, which has doubled since the pandemic and left many Londoners unable to afford nutritious food (GLA, 2023). Rising inflation and Brexit-induced supply chain disruptions have intensified these challenges and disproportionately affected low-income communities (Lang et al., 2018). Despite progress in community-led initiatives like urban agriculture and food redistribution programs that offer promising solutions to localised food insecurity, structural inequalities remain entrenched.

4.4. From Vision to Fragmentation: The Evolution and Decline of Rotterdam's Food Policy

Over the past two decades, Rotterdam has developed various strategic policies aimed at enhancing its national and international profile. The city has undergone a remarkable transformation, rebranding itself as a vibrant and innovative urban hub often referred to as the "capital of cool" (Custers & Willems, 2024). This rebranding has been driven by investments in urban regeneration, cultural and creative industries, and

sustainability initiatives, all designed to attract middle- and upper-class residents. Following the Stadsvisie (Urban Vision) in 2007 (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2007), which identified the city's challenges—including out-migration of skilled workers and an underdeveloped knowledge economy—Rotterdam sought to rebrand itself as a vibrant, attractive hub. As part of this strategy, sustainability and urban liveability were prioritised. Food policy emerged as part of this broader vision, seen as a tool to promote environmental sustainability, foster social cohesion, and enhance economic competitiveness. The first notable policy integrating food objectives appeared in the *Programma Duurzaam: Investeren in duurzame groei* (Sustainability Program: Investing in Sustainable Growth) in 2011 (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2011), which linked urban agriculture with sustainability. This was followed by the city's dedicated food strategy, *Food and the City: Stimuleren van stadslandbouw in en om Rotterdam* (Food and the City: Stimulating Urban Agriculture in and around Rotterdam), launched in 2012 (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2012). The document promoted urban agriculture as a means to achieve social, ecological, and economic goals simultaneously, emphasising the principles of "people-planet-profit." (p. 10).

The culmination of this new urban vision came in 2014 with the opening of the Markthal, a landmark complex combining residential units with an indoor market hall, retail spaces, and dining venues. Supported by the municipality, the Markthal became a symbol of Rotterdam's ambition to establish itself as a hub for food, innovative architecture, and urban regeneration. This blends economic, social, and spatial goals, showcasing how food can drive urban appeal. However, despite its success as a high-profile project, the Markthal reflects a predominantly market-driven approach to food policy focused on consumption and tourism rather than systemic solutions to food insecurity or sustainability (Cretella & Buenger, 2016).

Despite the ambitious goals of the document *Food and the City*, and unlike London's consistent focus on UFP, Rotterdam's food strategy failed to evolve into a sustained, long-term framework. After the completion of its initial phase, municipal funding for the initiative ceased, and no new comprehensive food policies were introduced. As a result, identifiable food-related activities have been sparse. Rotterdam has since shifted its focus towards EU-funded projects, such as the Healthy Wave initiative. This programme aims to provide at-risk children with nutritious, safe, and sustainable school meals (Healthy Wave, n.d.). However, Healthy Wave focuses narrowly on school meals rather than adopting a comprehensive approach to UFPs, driven largely by the availability of EU funding. Given this shift, Food and the City remains the most comprehensive and policy-driven food initiative in Rotterdam, making it the most suitable document for conducting CDA in the following section.

4.5. Neoliberal and Alternative Discourses in Rotterdam's Food and the City

Rotterdam's Food and the City agenda revolve around three main objectives—health, a sustainable economy, and spatial quality—which are integrated with urban agriculture initiatives under the principles of "people-planet-profit" (henceforth Gemeente Rotterdam, 2012, p. 10), aiming to connect social and environmental priorities with economic growth.

The economic framing of urban agriculture is particularly strong in the document's focus on real estate, employment, and commercial activity. The policy explicitly states that urban agriculture can "increase real estate value of areas," stimulate entrepreneurship, and generate "more jobs in the food, green, and agricultural sectors" (p. 10). Furthermore, it connects food initiatives to Rotterdam's broader strategy of

attracting a skilled workforce and boosting its international image, highlighting the "economic potential of food-related businesses to enhance the city's appeal" (p. 12), and that "Rotterdam will become more attractive due to a variety of new types of food production in and around the city" (p. 5). The labour market is also a key concern, with the strategy acknowledging a "mismatch between the supply of labour and the demand for labour in the green sector," suggesting that urban agriculture can help align local employment opportunities with economic growth (p. 21). The agenda further acknowledges Rotterdam's "multicultural" population as a key asset, seeing opportunities to mobilise entrepreneurship and knowledge.

This framing reflects a neoliberal governance logic, where food initiatives are positioned as tools for economic revitalisation rather than systemic alternatives to the dominant food system. Urban agriculture is thus presented as a driver of market competitiveness, contributing to urban branding and local economic expansion rather than challenging structural inequalities in food access and distribution.

Health is another primary goal, as the municipality aims to address high obesity rates, particularly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods: "Affordable vegetables and fruit must become available for all income groups" and that "city dwellers must become more aware of the provenance of products and of the seasons" (p. 18). This quote suggests an alternative framing, where food is positioned as a public good rather than a market commodity. The emphasis on accessibility for all income groups highlights a social justice perspective, prioritising equity in food distribution.

Another alternative element is the focus on social cohesion through gardening, which can "contribute to a more socially cohesive city by connecting people" (p. 15), reduce stress and health problems, and connect youth with sustainable practices: "In combination with more physical exercise, for instance through gardening, the increase of obesity and other physical complaints that are connected with a one-sided eating pattern can be slowed down" (p. 15). The document also encourages collaboration between residents through community gardens and highlights the need for food education, particularly at the primary school level. For example, one school offers a programme to teach children how to grow and prepare vegetables, as the municipality emphasises that "the basis of bad eating patterns is laid in early childhood" (p. 17).

The agenda also promotes a more localised and sustainable food system, by strengthening connections between regional producers and urban consumers through farmers' markets, municipal land for cultivation, and the inclusion of local food in catering contracts (p. 20). Additional initiatives, such as the Green Rooftops Program and an annual competition for citizen-led food projects, are positioned as ways to encourage urban agriculture, though these rely on short-term incentives. The document simultaneously markets local food as a consumer experience, appealing to "foodies" with regional products such as "apple juice from the Buytenhof in Rhoon," "ground-elder pesto from Park Zestienhoven," and "crisps from the Hoeksche Waard" (pp. 8, 17). This reflects an attempt to balance social inclusion with market-driven strategies, where food diversity is both valued for its cultural significance and promoted as an economic opportunity. However, the tension between alternative and neoliberal discourses becomes more evident when examining the trajectory of Rotterdam's food governance in the years following Food and the City.

Besides the Markthal, which symbolises Rotterdam's integration of food, urban regeneration, and tourism, and Healthy Wave, which reflects the city's participation in EU-funded food initiatives, the most prominent municipal food-related initiative today is the recent Rotterdam Food Hub—a 60-hectare industrial site

designed to strengthen the city's position in global agrifood logistics (Port of Rotterdam, n.d.). As Western Europe's largest transit port for agricultural, horticultural, and fishery products, Rotterdam seems to have prioritised food trade infrastructure over localised food production.

Whilst the municipality continues to highlight food as a strategic sector, its focus has shifted from urban agriculture and community-led sustainability towards consolidating Rotterdam's role as an international food trade hub, facilitating long-distance food supply chains that prioritise global markets. This shift raises broader questions about the long-term direction of UFPs and the extent to which alternative governance discourses (and projects) can endure in a policy landscape increasingly shaped by economic competitiveness and market-driven priorities. In Section 5, these dynamics will be further explored through a comparative analysis of Rotterdam and London, assessing how their distinct governance models and policy trajectories shape the role of food in urban development.

5. Comparative Analysis: Alternative and Neoliberal Trends in UFPs

This study sheds light on the neoliberal elements embedded within seemingly "alternative" development policies, through an examination of UFPs in London and Rotterdam. Despite their framing around the values of environmental and social sustainability, both strategies also present, discursively, economic goals tied to urban competitiveness and growth. A comparative analysis of these policies reveals key tensions between sustainability, equity, and market-driven governance, offering insights into how UFPs operate within broader urban development strategies. In Rotterdam, food policy has been leveraged as a tool to attract "creative talents" and to invite green investment, aligning with the city's branding as a desirable location for affluent demographics. This emphasis on economic competitiveness, however, is not unique to Rotterdam. As shown in Table 2, both cities demonstrate a hybrid approach in their core values, where alternative sustainability goals coexist with economic imperatives. London, by contrast, capitalised for instance on its Capital Growth campaign to present the 2012 Olympics as a green initiative, despite contradictions with the sustainability claims linked to Olympic sponsors.

The dominant focus on sustainability and social justice in these UFPs has certainly contributed to their "alternative" labelling, as noted in existing literature discussed in Section 2. However, closer inspection reveals that these "benevolent" objectives often carry a competitive edge tied to neoliberal priorities. For example, the very term "strategy" used in these policies implies a tactical, outcome-oriented approach, commonly associated with corporate or institutional governance rather than grassroots or community-based initiatives.

To further illustrate these dynamics, Table 2 presents a structured comparison of London and Rotterdam's food policies, assessing how they align with the alternative and neoliberal discourses previously illustrated in Table 1.

The comparative framework highlights how both cities navigate a complex interplay between alternative and neoliberal dimensions, incorporating elements of sustainability, inclusivity, and economic pragmatism in different ways. As shown in Table 2, neither city adheres strictly to one model. Instead, the UFPs reflect a hybridisation, where sustainability and economic interests overlap, making it increasingly difficult to separate the "entrepreneurial" from "sustainable" policymaking (Jonas & While, 2007). The LFS contains frequent references to economic development in its policy orientation, stressing the "market opportunities

Table 2. Comparative analysis of alternative and neoliberal elements in London and Rotterdam's UFPs.

Feature	London (2006, 2011, 2018 LFSs)	Classification	Rotterdam (2012 Food & the City)	Classification
Core Values	Sustainability, equity (early focus), urban branding (later shift)	Hybrid	Sustainability combined with economic competitiveness; food initiatives positioned as part of urban creativity strategies	Hybrid
Governance Approach	Institutionalised and evolving (Food Board, food poverty action plans)	Alternative	Project-based, reliant on private-sector and EU funding	Neoliberal
Role of Citizens	Consumer responsibility (2006) but growing emphasis on community participation (2018)	Hybrid	Citizens primarily framed as food entrepreneurs and consumers	Neoliberal
Primary Goals	Social justice (early years), shifting to economic growth and urban branding (2011), and again to public health (2018)	Hybrid	Balancing sustainability with economic competitiveness	Hybrid
Policy Orientation	Food security, public health, and local food systems (2006), later integrated with private investment and regeneration strategies (2011, 2018)	Hybrid	Urban agriculture for social and environmental benefits but also used to appeal to wealthier demographics	Hybrid
Examples in UFPs	London Food Board, food poverty action plans	Alternative	Markthal, real estate-driven urban agriculture, city branding, and community gardens	Hybrid
Key Critiques	Risk of sustainability being co-opted by economic interests, policy continuity dependent on political shifts		Lack of long-term municipal commitment, reliance on external funding, "gastro-gentrification"	

linked to sustainable food" and highlighting expected gains with language such as "enterprise," "thousands of jobs," and "billions of pounds." Under Boris Johnson's mayoralty, this strategy functioned as a response to criticism over the 2012 Olympics sponsorships by major corporations like McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Sodexo, and BP (the latter being branded as a "sustainability partner"), which attracted scrutiny due to its limited alignment with the principles of sustainable food governance (Cretella, 2015). The strategic engagement of corporate actors in these policies further highlights how power is concentrated among business elites, shaping urban food governance to reflect market interests rather than community needs.

The two documents also illustrate a broader neoliberal theme of positioning citizens as consumers, where sustainable food habits and choices are presented as issues of rational action alone. For example, Rotterdam's policy asserts that "affordable vegetables and fruit must become available for all income groups," yet follows this by stressing that "city dwellers must become more aware of the provenance of

products and of the seasons."). In shifting the focus onto individuals, the local government omits structural welfare solutions, assuming that food knowledge and healthy lifestyles are universally accessible without addressing the socio-economic barriers involved.

Rotterdam's policy orientation also seeks to appeal to specific demographics by promoting regional, artisanal products that are generally priced higher. These symbolic products, combined with activities like urban agriculture and the promotion of food-related urban spaces, reflect a targeted appeal to middle- and upper-income residents rather than to low-income populations. This signals a form of "gastro-gentrification" where UFPs reinforce social hierarchies, privileging the tastes and consumption patterns of wealthier groups (Veron, 2024). These findings resonate with Shannon's (2013) concept of Neoliberal paternalism, whereby governance around food issues adopts a moralising tone primarily disciplining low-income populations. Our analysis goes further: moral coordinates within food policy can also serve to attract and speak to wealthier classes, with cities using food to signal the type of residents they wish to attract. For instance, London's "culinary attractions—from street markets to specialist shops to Michelin-starred restaurants—are essential ingredients of the city's unrivalled cultural scene," a message targeted at the city's middle- and upper-class residents.

This also resonates with Tornaghi's (2014) concern that urban food actions, rather than challenging socio-economic inequality, could exacerbate exclusionary dynamics. The cases of London and Rotterdam reveal a transfer of responsibility for ethical and sustainable food choices to citizens. Through the lens of CDA, this shift illustrates how discursive power operates to shape public perception of sustainability as a matter of personal responsibility rather than a structural issue requiring systemic intervention (Lockie, 2009). By conceptualising citizens as consumers within these frameworks, both municipalities champion ideals of sustainable, artisanal, and local food production—commodities that, by their very nature, are priced above the reach of lower-income residents. It is worth noting, however, that London's most recent policy of 2018 takes steps toward addressing some of these disparities.

This transfer of responsibility, alongside the outsourcing of public services, aligns with the neoliberal paradigm of public governance known as New Public Management (Pollitt, 2003). The latter emerged as a model in the early 1980s as the tendency to bring the coordination mechanism of the market to the public domain. That meant holding a neoliberal orientation with regards to governance: extending market mechanisms on the public services (e.g., competitive tendering), imposing the view of "citizens" as "consumers," and in general keeping a less defined distinction between the public, market and voluntary sectors.

Also, Rotterdam's core aim to use food as an attraction for the creative class aligns with broader theories of urban creativity (Florida, 2007; Landry, 2012; Mayer, 2013; Peck, 2005), where food-related spaces like farmers markets, urban allotments, and high-end cafés support a curated urban experience designed to appeal to specific demographics. These spaces are often advertised as "sustainable" rather than entrepreneurial, sidelining the commercial nature of such initiatives. Evidence from food projects in Rotterdam suggests a clear connection to gentrification, where such ventures often facilitate the influx of wealthier populations into urban neighbourhoods (Anguelovski, 2016; Cohen, 2018).

In general, UFPs are often framed as tools for advancing social and environmental goals, but our analysis suggests that they can also function as instruments for economic growth within a neoliberal framework. Although economic development is sometimes positioned as a means to enhance social justice and

sustainability, our findings indicate that UFPs operate within the dominant neoliberal food regime. Rather than disrupting the structural dynamics of global food economics, these policies appear to focus on mitigating their consequences, raising questions about the extent to which UFPs can serve as genuine alternatives, as claimed by most scholars, to market-driven governance.

However, the 2018 LFS reveals a discursive shift, adopting a more pragmatic view of what can realistically be achieved within municipal governance. This realism is evident in the mayor's acknowledgement of his own limitations: "The Mayor will do all he can to help tackle" food-related issues, yet "not everything that can be done to improve…is within the Mayor's powers." These statements reflect a shift from earlier, idealised aspirations toward a more measured perspective on municipal capacity. By openly acknowledging the limits of local governance, the 2018 LFS reframes UFP as a shared endeavour that requires alignment across various levels of government. Khan's appeals to the national government underscore the need for broader, integrated support to effectively tackle complex food issues.

Whilst this highlights the complexities of multi-level food governance, it remains unclear to what extent these strategies were shaped by top-down decision-making or bottom-up stakeholder engagement. The extent to which citizens' perspectives influenced either the neoliberal or alternative dimensions of these policies is not explicitly documented, posing a limitation in assessing the participatory nature of these strategies. This ambiguity highlights the challenges of multi-level governance, where food strategies must navigate the competing demands of municipal authority, national policy frameworks, and stakeholder participation. As such, lasting change in urban food systems demands not only local action but also coordinated, multi-level partnerships that integrate diverse perspectives and governance scales (Sonnino & Coulson, 2021).

To conclude, the UFPs discussed in this article are neither divorced from economic imperatives nor isolated from the broader neoliberal framework of contemporary urban development. As shown in Table 2, these policies exhibit instead hybrid characteristics, blending alternative governance approaches—such as urban agriculture, community engagement, and food security initiatives—with economic rationales tied to urban regeneration and competitiveness.

6. Conclusion: Toward Inclusive and Sustainable UFPs

This article set out to critically examine how UFPs in London and Rotterdam navigate competing priorities. Through the use of CDA, policy documents were analysed to explore the intersection between alternative and neoliberal governance logics. The findings reveal that whilst these policies are often framed around sustainability, community, and social inclusion, they simultaneously accommodate market-driven objectives such as urban branding, economic competitiveness, and selective inclusivity. As a result, rather than challenging the structural inequalities embedded in the global food system, UFPs risk reinforcing neoliberal paradigms by prioritising market-driven goals and community self-reliance.

London's and Rotterdam's respective UFPs also illustrate divergent approaches to governance. London's sustained engagement with food policy, supported by consistent funding and a dedicated team, reflects a more integrated, evolving approach that seeks to address issues like food poverty and public health. The 2018 LFS reveals a distinct shift towards cooperative governance and an acknowledgement of the

limitations of municipal power in tackling complex food issues, with the mayor calling for support from the national government and cross-sector partnerships to strengthen the city's food resilience.

Conversely, Rotterdam's discontinuation of its Food and the City initiative following its initial project period reflects a shorter-term, project-based approach to UFPs, characterised by its reliance to continue investing in the topic based on external funding like the EU-backed Healthy Wave initiative. This dependence on grant cycles underscores Rotterdam's selective engagement with food policy, treating it more as an urban branding tool than as a comprehensive strategy for food resilience. This shift is further reflected in the city's prioritisation of large-scale agrifood infrastructure, as seen in the Rotterdam Food Hub.

As UFPs continue to evolve in Europe, it is crucial to critically assess their long-term governance models. Will cities continue to rely on short-term project-based funding (like Rotterdam), or will they integrate food policies into more institutionalised, long-term strategies that try to address structural inequalities (like London)? Furthermore, as municipalities take on an increasing role in food sustainability, the question remains whether they truly possess the power and capacity to implement transformative food policies, or whether their actions are constrained by the broader global economy of food governance.

As with any discourse analysis, this study is inherently interpretive, shaped by the researcher's reading of policy texts. Whilst this approach reveals how UFPs are framed and legitimised, it primarily captures institutional narratives rather than the lived experiences of those affected. Future research could complement this by incorporating ethnographic methods, stakeholder interviews, or participatory approaches to examine how UFPs are experienced, particularly by marginalised communities.

Moreover, urban food governance extends beyond official documents. To contextualise policy discourse, key developments shaping food governance today were also mapped. The Rotterdam Food Hub illustrates how the city's priorities have shifted from food resilience toward large-scale agrifood logistics. Similarly, recent reports from the London Assembly on worsening food insecurity highlight the limits of municipal interventions in addressing structural inequalities. Considering these broader developments allows for an assessment not only of the rhetoric of UFPs but also of their material trajectories and evolving governance priorities.

These findings also call into question the broader role of cities as key actors in tackling global food challenges, a narrative that has gained traction in urban governance scholarship. As discussed in Section 1, cities are increasingly positioned as the frontline problem-solvers for complex global crises, from climate change to resource scarcity, socio-economic inequalities, and public health crises (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020; Tzaninis et al., 2021). However, given the ongoing multi-crisis context, which includes post-pandemic recovery, geopolitical disruptions in food supply chains and worsening food insecurity, does it still make sense to assume that cities can effectively lead the transition toward more sustainable food systems? The cases of London and Rotterdam suggest that whilst UFPs can play a role, they often remain embedded in broader market-driven governance logics, raising questions about whether municipal food strategies alone can meaningfully challenge the structural inequalities of the global food system.

Ultimately, the findings call for a more critical and reflexive approach to the development of UFPs, one that moves beyond sustainability rhetoric to ensure that food policies are not only resilient but also structurally inclusive, long-term, and capable of addressing systemic food inequalities.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Most of these documents are publicly available through the official websites of the respective city governments. One document—*The Mayor's Food Strategy: Healthy and Sustainable Food for London. An Implementation Plan 2011–2013*—is no longer accessible online, but access can be requested from the Greater London Authority's Public Liaison Unit (mayor@london.gov.uk).

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