

Opinion: Good food policies – it's time we all got involved to get what we want

November 30 2016, by Corinna Hawkes



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't notice. In the furore of Trumpagedon, a little publicised revolution was taking place in America: [five cities in the US](#) voted for sugary drinks taxes.

Sugary drinks taxes are already in place in [several countries](#), including

Barbados, Chile, France and Mexico. And other countries, such as the UK, have made plans to introduce such a tax. In the 2016 budget, the former chancellor, George Osborne, proposed a [soft drinks industry levy](#) to be launched in April 2018.

But the US has been tough. It took 15 years from the [publication of the original article](#) proposing taxes on "foods of low nutritional value" for the first US city ([Berkeley](#)) to impose a tax in January 2015.

[Philadelphia](#) followed. What was notable in the next five cities – Boulder, San Francisco, Oakland, Albany and Cook County (including Chicago) – is that they were all voted in by people [at the ballot box](#).

There are now [7.5m people](#) in the US who live in a locality with a sugar tax. Some of the support is about health, some about raising cash.

Whatever their reasons, people are saying: this is what we want for our communities. It's allowing public participation – bringing people's voices into policies designed to improve the food system.

Food is hotly debated around the world, but we still have a long way to go to do food better, to create a food system that isn't feeding half the world so badly they are either undernourished or overweight, that isn't emitting around 25% of greenhouse gases, that isn't wasting 30% of what it produces, and that isn't treating its millions of workers like dirt (and many of its animals).

Four ways to use people power

Taking a people-centered approach will be key to the solutions. This means four things.

First, people defining the problem. Decades of research on [food insecurity](#) has found that the most accurate way to measure what is also termed "food poverty" is to rely on people's responses to questions. This is a completely different approach to relying on numerical measures of

how much food is available and is why the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations is developing a global measure of access to food called [Voices of the Hungry](#). Asking people to describe their food situations can help identify solutions more effectively – if the main cause is housing costs, for example, trying to solve it only with food won't work.

Second, people's participation. Voting, as in the five cities, is one way. Another are the [food policy](#) councils that allow citizens to have a voice in policy making. This is about people bringing their own solutions to the table which can then be translated into action by government officials. We have much to learn about how to do this from what is still a [work-in-progress](#) in the US.

Third, listening and learning from people's experiences. If policymakers listen properly they become open to learning. One of my favourite examples of this comes from Amsterdam, a city where, unusually, the number of overweight kids from poor households is [trending downwards](#). Here the municipal government has listened to communities and caregivers and improved the design of solutions in their [Healthy Weight Programme](#) as a result.

Fourth, engaging with the people delivering the solutions. A great example comes from the International Institute for Environment and Development think tank. By bringing street vendors into their research in urban slums, [they found that](#) creating sanitary conditions for selling fresh nutritious food is key, far more so than proposals proffered by the external "experts" like modern markets, subsidies or aid.

The [Centre for Food Policy](#) at City University has been studying, teaching and engaging in food policy for over 20 years. Our work has shown how complex and messy it can be. Bringing people in might appear to make it even messier. But do it we must. In the wake of Trump

and Brexit we have to learn the lesson of people power. We have to engage with people at the grass roots. Making top-down assumptions about what is good for [people](#) isn't going to run anymore. Nor can it just be about bottom-up, small-scale action. It's that sweet spot in-between that's going to lead to [food](#) policy that is both inclusive and effective.

Some years ago I was reporting from New York City for an article about farmers markets in poor neighbourhoods. "What's the key to the success of this market?" I asked the market manager, curious to know why a low-income group was flooding in to buy veggies in a community known for poor diets. "I'm an ex-cop," he told me. "Unlike other places, they feel safe here." Who knew. Sometimes, you just have to ask.

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