

University Food Policies

DESIGNING SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS ON CAMPUS

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DESIGNING SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS ON CAMPUS

Edited by
Davide Fassi

PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT

Eleonora De Marchi

ART DIRECTION

Marco Quaggiotto

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Giada Zoncada, Arianna Priori

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2. Codesigning the Polimi Food Policy

Marta Corubolo, Irene Bassi

Design Department, Politecnico di Milano

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the co-design process developed for the Polimi Food Policy, outlining the experimental methodology applied to validate and test the University Food Policy Guidelines introduced in this volume. The experimentation was conducted within the institutional context of Politecnico di Milano, where the proposed framework was implemented and evaluated through a situated and iterative process. Drawing on expertise in service and spatial design, the research adopted a participatory approach grounded in co-design, integrating top-down strategic direction with bottom-up contributions through codesign workshops and multi-level collaboration tables. The activities supported the mapping of the existing institutional landscape, the validation of guiding principles, and the progressive translation of shared priorities into operational actions. The chapter provides insights into participatory processes by documenting the transition from guideline definition to the collaborative formulation and implementation of policy measures. It demonstrates how co-design methodologies

can support the development of sustainable food policies within higher education institutions, with the potential to be embedded within broader university sustainability strategies.

2.1 Universities as Food Policies actors

In recent years, higher education institutions have progressively expanded their sustainability agendas beyond research innovation and environmental performance to include the everyday systems that sustain campus life (Trencher *et al.*, 2014; Bryman, 2016). Among these, food has emerged as a particularly strategic domain. University campuses concentrate large and diverse populations, operate extensive catering and procurement infrastructures, and generate significant material flows, including food surplus and waste. These conditions position universities as influential actors capable of shaping production choices, supply relationships, consumption patterns, and resource management practices (Lang & Barling, 2012; Morgan & Sonnino, 2013).

At the same time, the societal role of universities has evolved. Their mission increasingly encompasses forms of public engagement that extend beyond teaching and research, embracing responsibilities linked to social innovation, community wellbeing, and territorial development. Food systems, situated at the intersection of environmental sustainability, public health, and social equity, offer a concrete arena in which this expanded institutional mandate can be operationalised. Interventions in food procurement, service provision, and waste reduction therefore become not only managerial adjustments but expressions of broader institutional commitments (EUROCITIES, 2017, EU Commission, 2025).

Within this landscape, universities are gaining recognition as experimental fields for the development of integrated food policies. Their organisational scale allows for the testing of systemic interventions, while their educational and research capacities enable critical reflection, monitoring, and knowledge transfer. Campus environments can thus operate as micro-cosmos: enabling prototyping places where new service models, supply chain configurations, and behavioural initiatives are collaboratively explored and developed (De Rosa, 2024). In these contexts, the academic community can be actively

engaged in co-design processes and, crucially, in the prototyping and testing of innovative solutions (Bjögvinsson *et al.*, 2012; Trencher *et al.*, 2014; Meroni *et al.*, 2018). This favourable participatory involvement allows food-related interventions to be shaped through situated knowledge and iterative experimentation, which might extend to local food networks and community-oriented food initiatives.

Indeed, food policy experimentations have demonstrated how such processes often intersects with the development of alternative and territorially embedded food services (Comune di Milano, 2015), supporting cities in fostering more resilient food ecosystems (Morgan & Morley, 2014). Food policy itself is increasingly understood as a multi-scalar field, where global agendas, urban strategies, and local practices intersect, requiring integrated and cross-disciplinary governance approaches (Edwards *et al.*, 2024). Initiatives such as urban gardens, farmers' markets, cooperative purchasing schemes, and educational food programmes contribute not only to improving food quality but also to strengthening social cohesion and place-based learning (Marino *et al.*, 2024; Fassi *et al.*, 2016; Torrijos *et al.*, 2021). Within this perspective, universities can act as intermediate arenas where these dynamics are translated into situated institutional practices. Through partnerships with municipalities, civil society organisations, and regional stakeholders, these initiatives may extend within and beyond campus boundaries, reinforcing the role of universities as catalysts for broader food system transitions (Fassi, 2024).

The case explored in this chapter is situated within this evolving institutional landscape. Politecnico di Milano operates within the metropolitan context of Milan, a city whose food governance trajectory has been significantly shaped by the legacy of Expo 2015 (Milan Urban Food Policy Pact). The event stimulated the establishment of municipal food policy infrastructures, contributed to positioning food as a strategic axis of urban sustainability, and continues to provide fertile ground for institutional experimentation.

Within this enabling urban and policy environment, the university's engagement with food system transformation has progressively taken shape through a combination of research, design, and governance initiatives. The activities presented in this chapter are situated precisely at the intersection between city-level food strategies and

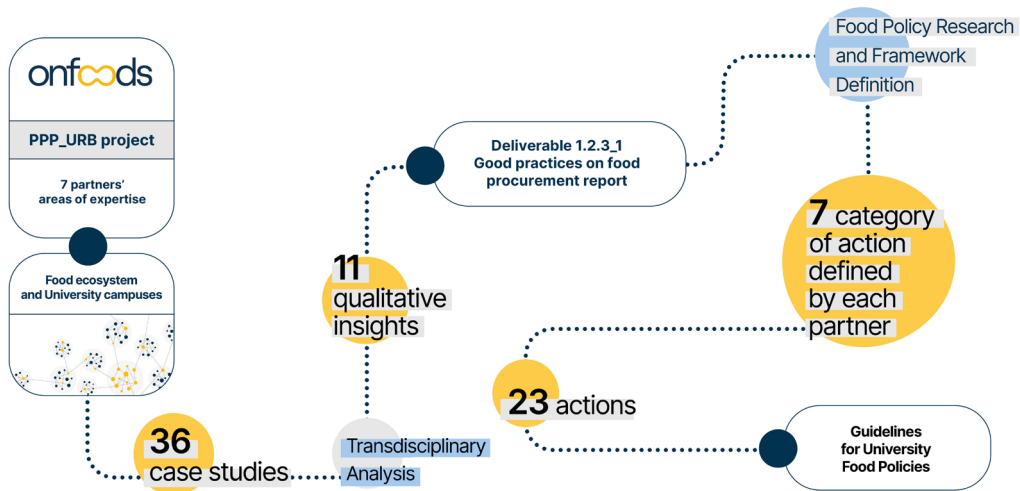


Figure 2.1.
PPP_URB process.
Credits: Polimi DESIS Lab.

campus-based experimentation, where institutional sustainability agendas converge with broader urban food policy trajectories.

More specifically, the work emerges from the wider research framework of the PPP_URB project developed within the OnFoods programme. In its earlier phases, the research focused on analysing university food procurement systems and led to the development of a set of Guidelines for University Food Policies (GUPP) intended to support institutional transitions toward more sustainable food ecosystems (Figure 2.1). The phase documented here marks a shift from analytical development to applied experimentation. The authors, researchers from the Department of Design at Politecnico di Milano, engaged in codesigning, prototyping and contextualising these guidelines within their own institutional environment. Drawing on expertise in spatial and service design, and on participatory design methodologies, the team activated a structured pathway aimed at translating policy principles into operational and governance practices.

2.2 Politecnico di Milano framework: a commitment towards sustainability

Despite the absence of a dedicated, food-specific office, Politecnico di Milano has long demonstrated a strong institutional commitment to

sustainability. Such commitment is structurally coordinated through the sustainability strategy, which oversees the environmental and social sustainability of the university's core domains, including research, teaching, third mission and campus management. Its mandate is to support the university's transition toward more sustainable models by fostering inclusion, reducing emissions, and advancing the objectives of the United Nations 2030 Agenda.

Institutional priorities include promoting sustainability-oriented research, equipping students with environmental and social responsibility competences, improving campus quality, safety, and internal mobility, advancing equal opportunities, and strengthening governance. These actions are framed within the Polimi Strategic Sustainability Plan, which ensures alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and foresees dedicated actions, projects as well as structures, which have been developed to assure the scouting and implementation of measures and interventions (Politecnico di Milano, 2025). All this is sustained internally by a Sustainability Task Force which operates also through annual Sustainability Working Groups: participatory working tables conceived as idea incubators involving academic staff, technical-administrative personnel, researchers, and students. Proposals developed within these groups, when deemed viable, are operationalised by the university's technical offices.

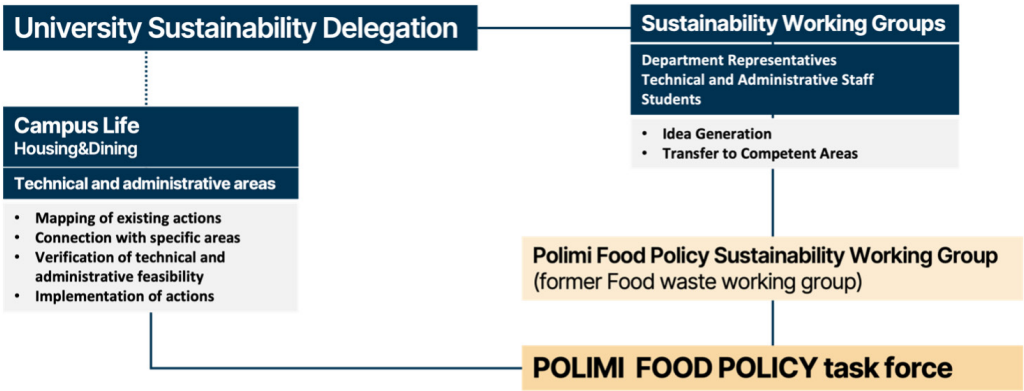
Within this institutional landscape, food has not historically been addressed as a standalone policy domain but rather as a cross-cutting theme embedded in multiple sustainability initiatives. Existing actions contribute to several SDGs: for instance, the university's zero-plastic objective, aimed at eliminating disposable or non-reusable tableware, supports SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), while the installation of drinking water fountains across campuses contributes to SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), alongside strategies and programmes designed to reduce food waste.

The work on the University Food Policy builds upon an already established internal infrastructure of distributed and structured participation. Existing governance mechanisms, particularly the Sustainability Working Groups, provided fertile ground for activating dialogue, mobilising expertise, and experimenting with collaborative agenda-setting paths. At the same time, the process brought

to light the need for a more systemic and structurally coordinated approach to food related issues. Rather than remaining confined to consumption practices alone, the OnFoods research highlighted how food sustainability challenges extend across the entire food value chain, encompassing procurement models, supply infrastructures, service organisation, spatial configurations, behavioural dynamics, and waste management systems. This recognition catalysed a process of collaborative repositioning. The Sustainability Working Group, initially focused on “Surplus and Waste”, progressively expanded its scope, reframing its focus from the circumscribed operational domain of surplus and waste management to the broader and more strategic terrain of Food Policy. Institutional momentum generated through the OnFoods partnership and related research initiatives further supported this shift, enabling the activation of a transdisciplinary dialogue.

Colleagues from multiple departments, including Design, Management Engineering, Architecture, Construction Engineering and the Built Environment, and Chemistry, were engaged alongside representatives from Campus Life, the administrative unit responsible for housing and dining services. Through this convergence of research expertise, operational knowledge, and governance perspectives, the Polimi Food Policy Task Force was established (Figure 2.2). Its mandate is to coordinate internal competences, support new initiatives and consolidate existing ones, and ensure alignment between food related actions and the Polimi Strategic Plan for Sustainability.

Figure 2.2.
Establishment process of the Polimi Food Policy Task Force (PFP task force).



2.3 Codesigning the Polimi Food Policy

The experimentation conducted at Politecnico di Milano focuses on the activation of participatory process structured around scouting, co-design, assesment and feedback. The objective is twofold: to support the development of an institutional food policy and to integrate the capacity of co-design processes in facilitating its implementation.

The development of the Polimi Food Policy has been intentionally configured not merely as a participatory initiative, but as an institutionalised process that integrates governance, strategic planning, and community engagement within a coherent and actionable framework. In this sense, co-design is not treated simply as a method for idea generation, but as a design-led process through which policy directions can be collectively explored, negotiated, and progressively embedded within the organisational context of the university (Blomkamp, 2022; Richardson *et al.*, 2026).

The co-design process extends beyond the episodic nature of workshops. It contributes to the consolidation of existing initiatives, the identification of systemic gaps, and the articulation of coordinated actions, while at the same time creating the conditions for their implementation. In line with participatory design approaches that emphasise the ongoing and situated nature of design processes, co-design can be understood as an infrastructuring process, a situated and ongoing practice that links design interventions to the social, organisational, and temporal conditions through which change becomes durable (Hillgren *et al.*, 2011; Bjögvinnsson *et al.*, 2012; Karasti, 2014). This highlights that the work of policy formation does not occur through a single moment of participation, but through the progressive shaping of relations, roles, and arenas of action (Karasti *et al.*, 2018). Within this framework, participatory design assumes a central role. Rather than functioning as a consultative mechanism, it operates as a cross-disciplinary approach capable of structuring dialogue, mediating institutional complexity, and enabling shared decision-making across heterogeneous actors. By engaging students, academic staff, administrative personnel, and service providers, the process fosters the co-production of knowl-

edge and supports the emergence of policy proposals grounded in everyday practices and operational realities (Trencher *et al.*, 2014; Le Dantec & DiSalvo, 2013).

At the same time, the Polimi Food Policy process can be interpreted as operating at the intersection between commoning and institutioning. On the one hand, co-design activities enable the emergence of shared problem framings, situated knowledge, and collective interpretations across diverse actors. On the other, they contribute to embedding these contributions within formal governance arrangements, aligning them with institutional priorities and translating them into operational and decision-making processes (Teli *et al.*, 2020; Huybrechts *et al.*, 2017). From this perspective, the process does not only generate proposals, but also mediates between bottom-up contributions and top-down structures, making participation politically and organisationally consequential (Escobar, 2022).

2.3.1 Process structure: phases and tools

The design of the co-design tables was informed by seven categories of actions outlined in Chapter 1 and articulated in a collection of 23 specific actions: Nutritional Guidelines; Food Offering Variety; Food Offering Sustainability; Space and Services for Food Consumption and Self-production; Surplus Food and Food Waste Management; Training and Awareness for Healthy and Sustainable Eating Habits; and Assessment, Co-design and Feedback. To translate the seven GUPF action categories into operational discussion domains, they were clustered into four thematic co-design tables, with a monitoring system of activities integrated as a transversal dimension across all themes:

1. Spaces and Services Focusing on the spatial, infrastructural, and organisational conditions enabling sustainable food consumption, including dining environments, service logistics, and opportunities for self-production and community activation.
2. Quality and Variety Addressing the nutritional profile, diversity, affordability, and environmental sustainability of campus food offerings.

3. Training and Engagement Exploring educational programmes, awareness campaigns, and participatory initiatives aimed at fostering healthier and more sustainable eating behaviours.
4. Surplus and Waste Investigating systemic strategies for surplus redistribution, waste prevention, monitoring systems, and circular resource practices.

A fifth integrative table, referred to as “Operational Instruments”, was also established. This table brought together senior managers and administrative directors from across the university to assess the feasibility of the proposed initiatives and determine whether and how they could be operationally implemented. By involving key decision-makers, this stage ensured that selected ideas were not only conceptually robust but also practically actionable, taking into account institutional capabilities, resources, and constraints.

Each table operated as both a validation moment, reviewing the relevance of pre-identified GUPF actions, and a co-generative space for new proposals.

To ensure informed and productive dialogue, each table was “nurtured” through a structured set of preparatory materials and activation tools. Two main inputs were designed:

- Consultative materials, including existing campus mappings, prior research outputs, existing data and the GUPF framework itself. These ensured that discussions built upon consolidated evidence rather than anecdotal perceptions.
- Interactive design tools, a set of physical discussion cards structured around a “What if...?” speculative format, integrating actions already piloted within the university (Figure 2.3). These cards translated policy actions into open prompts, encouraging participants to interpret, critique, refine, or expand them. The tool was intentionally open-ended, allowing entirely new cards, and thus new policy ideas, to emerge during workshops.

Each workshop was designed to take place within a two hour time-frame. It opened with a ten minute introduction to the University Food Policy, delivered by the facilitators to provide the necessary context, followed by a brief round of introductions, allowing participants to

the thematic focus of each workshop and supported by preparatory mapping activities.

In this regard, the university's Sustainability Working Groups represented a key governance infrastructure mobilised within the Food Policy process. At the time of the pilot, nine thematic Working Groups were active. After excluding those with limited relevance to food systems, five groups were identified as strategically pertinent and were successfully engaged through existing institutional networks. Their participation across the thematic co-design tables enabled food-related discussions to intersect with ongoing sustainability initiatives, reinforcing institutional coherence while avoiding thematic fragmentation.

Participant affiliations were documented to provide an overview of the composition of the working groups (Table 2.1). Student participation was activated primarily through representative bodies and organised associations. While this ensured the presence of student perspectives within the co-design process, it also highlighted the opportunity to further broaden consultative mechanisms in future phases. Expanding direct student involvement beyond representative channels is recognised as a relevant area for development, particularly in light of the central role that everyday consumption practices and campus life experiences play in shaping food system transitions.

Table 2.1.
Codesign data collection.

	Table 1. Spaces and Services	Table 2. Quality and Variety	Table 3. Training and Engagement	Table 4. Surplus and Waste
Involved action from GUPP	7/23	10/23	10/23	4/23
N. participants	22	19	12	19
Academic staff	3	12	10	11
Technical and administrative staff	12	7	1	4
Students	7	3	2	4
N. sustainability working group involved	3	2	2	3
Cards presented	17	13	19	19
Cards generated	+5	+13	+11	+6

2.4 From ideation to structured knowledge

To ensure methodological consistency across the participatory pathway, a shared evidence-gathering framework was established for all four co-design tables. Facilitators systematically collected and mapped a common set of qualitative and quantitative indicators (Table 2.1), enabling cross-comparison between thematic arenas and supporting the consolidation of policy-relevant insights.

The co-design activities generated a substantial corpus of ideational material. Across the four thematic tables, participants collectively produced 103 discussion cards, each representing a distinct proposal, recommendation, or strategic insight (Table 2.1). These outputs constituted the raw knowledge base emerging from the participatory process and demonstrated the generative capacity of the co-design setting.

Following the workshops, a multi-step refinement process was activated to transform this ideational output into a structured policy framework. An initial screening phase was conducted by the facilitation team. Despite the thematic differentiation of the tables, overlaps among proposals quickly became evident. Facilitators therefore undertook a consolidation process that included merging identical or highly similar ideas, clarifying partially overlapping proposals removing contributions that, while relevant to sustainability broadly, fell outside the operational scope of a university food policy. This first analytical filtering reduced the total number of ideas from 103 to 68 consolidated proposals.

A second analytical step was conducted on the refined set of 68 ideas. This phase enabled the validation of the original seven GUPF action categories that had structured the co-design tables. At the same time, revisiting the contributions that emerged from the workshops and considering the university's sustainability strategy framework led to a process of thematic emergence and re-aggregation.

A first layer of analysis examined the relationship between each co-design table and the 23 actions outlined in the GUPF framework. Facilitators tracked how discussions, proposals, and critiques emerging from each table aligned with, expanded, or reframed these predefined actions. The mapping revealed differentiated yet complementary coverage:

- spaces and services: 7 out of 23 actions;
- quality and variety: 10 out of 23 actions;
- training and engagement: 10 out of 23 actions;
- surplus and waste: 4 out of 23 actions.

While each table addressed a specific subset of actions, their combined outputs covered the entire GUPF framework, confirming the effectiveness of the thematic clustering in ensuring systemic policy coverage.

On the other side, the emerging actions were reorganised into five overarching policy areas forming the structural backbone of the emerging Polimi Food Policy (Table 2.2). These macro-domains more accurately reflect the institutional context within which the policy is expected to operate:

1. variety, quality and sustainability of the food supply chain;
2. spaces and services for the food supply chain;
3. management of food surplus and food waste;
4. education and awareness for healthy and sustainable dietary habits;
5. design, evaluation and monitoring.

While four of these areas substantially mirror the original GUPF categories, the latter two domains assume a more context-specific configuration within the Polimi framework. In particular, the dimension of design, evaluation and monitoring highlights the role of co-design not only as a participatory method but as an infrastructuring process that supports continuous assessment, feedback loops, and policy adaptation over time.

Throughout the refinement process, progress was periodically reviewed with the Polimi Food Policy Task Force, ensuring governance

Table 2.2.
Codesign data collection.

Guidelines for Universities Food Policy	Polimi Food Policy
1. Nutritional Guidelines 2. Food Offering Variety 3. Food Offering Sustainability 4. Space & Services for Food Consumption and self-production 5. Surplus food and food waste management 6. Training & Awareness for Healthy/ Sustainable Eating Habits 7. Assessment, Codesign and Feedback	1. Variety, quality and sustainability of the food supply chain 2. Spaces and services for the food supply chain 3. Management of food surplus and food waste 4. Education and awareness for healthy and sustainable dietary habits 5. Design, evaluation and monitoring

oversight and strategic coherence. Simultaneously, continuous consultation was activated with the Campus Life Office, specifically the Housing and Dining Services unit responsible for managing university systems. Drawing on direct management experience, they provided insights into existing pilot initiatives, operational constraints, regulatory and safety considerations, cost structures and contractual frameworks, as well as lessons learned from both successful and unsuccessful experiments. This evidence-based contribution significantly strengthened the feasibility grounding of the proposals.

A further screening phase aligned the consolidated proposals with the priorities outlined in the University Strategic Plan for Sustainability. This evaluative step reduced the portfolio from 68 to 50 actionable measures, subdivided into 19 actions already in place and considered replicable or scalable and 31 new or partially developed actions with implementation potential. For each of these 50 actions, the relevant administrative unit was identified to assess feasibility in terms of economic costs, implementation timelines, safety regulations, and infrastructural implications. This process resulted in a final portfolio of 40 priority initiatives, which now constitute the draft structural framework of the Polimi Food Policy.

2.5 The 5 Action Categories: targeted design interventions

As an outcome of this process, the Polimi Food Policy, as above mentioned, was reorganised into five thematic action categories that address the food system across its main material, organisational, cultural, and governance dimensions. Considered together, these areas show that the emerging Food Policy does not focus only on food provision itself, but on the broader set of conditions that shape access, use, behaviour, inclusion, and long-term governance. In this sense, the categories represent not simply thematic clusters, but specific areas of design intervention through which the university can act on the campus food environment in a systemic and coordinated way.

The first category, "Variety, quality and sustainability of the food supply chain", positions universities as key actors in promoting a food

Note 1.
[https://www.mase.gov.it/
portale/cam-vigenti](https://www.mase.gov.it/portale/cam-vigenti)

system that reflects principles of quality, diversity and sustainability while guiding the everyday choices of the academic community to ensure healthy, balanced options, directly impacting public health outcomes and disease prevention. Campus food-related services become strategic spaces for fostering mindful and healthy eating habits, valuing local and seasonal products, reducing waste and supporting ethical, transparent sourcing. Through this category, the university seeks to exceed the minimum requirements set by the Italian regulation on Minimum Environmental Criteria (CAM)¹, encouraging suppliers to provide a more diverse, plant-forward, healthy and culturally inclusive offer. By integrating new parameters into tender specifications and procurement systems, the university goal is to strengthen science-based standards for nutritional and environmental performance, to increase the availability of fresh and unpackaged foods, and to promote low-impact supply chains. This approach aims at expanding university food provision into a broader system capable of generating environmental, economic and social value for the entire community while directly contributing to public health and ecological stewardship.

The second category, "Spaces and services for the food supply chain", addresses the service, infrastructural and spatial aspects of how food is accessed, transformed and consumed on campus. This category focuses on optimising existing facilities, enhancing non-conventional spaces and services, and developing innovative solutions to respond to the wide range of needs associated with food consumption. These needs concern not only nourishment, but also the social and relational dimensions of eating, including the preparation, selection, ordering, and communication practices that shape the everyday meal experience. The spaces and services dedicated to food influence attitudes, preferences and ways of interacting, contributing to the construction of a shared food culture. Promoting healthy and sustainable behaviours within campuses therefore requires designing welcoming and inclusive places that encourage mindful practices and value food as an element of both individual and collective well-being. This translates into interventions that range from upgrading existing spaces to creating new collaborative food services and areas for conviviality, food transformation and consumption and self-production.

The third category, “Management of food surpluses and waste”, recognises that preventing waste, redistributing surplus and monitoring resource flows are now priorities for universities committed to fostering more conscious and sustainable food practices. Managing surplus food, whether by planning demand more accurately, optimising portion sizes or redistributing excess meals to internal initiatives or local associations, not only reduces overall waste but also raises awareness of the environmental and social impact of discarded food. Additional measures, such as the sale of unsold items at reduced prices, the adoption of reusable or recyclable containers for take-away meals and the activation of composting systems for organic waste, support a more circular use of resources while also improving accessibility. Together, these interventions help strengthen a culture of shared responsibility, in which every food-related choice contributes to collective sustainability and supports individuals and communities in need.

The fourth category, “Education and awareness for healthy and sustainable dietary habits”, underscores the university’s responsibility in shaping food culture by promoting dedicated training, enhancing community engagement and communicating the actions undertaken. Integrating sustainability into both curricula and everyday practices strengthens the university’s capacity to generate innovation and contribute to new social and cultural models. Actions in this area include research and monitoring activities, surveys to understand students’ dietary habits, and targeted initiatives that link individual choices to global challenges such as climate change and the sustainability of agri-food systems. Proposed measures such as the creation of a Polimi Food Academy, cooking and nutrition workshops, improved labelling and storytelling on food origins, and high-visibility events and awareness campaigns all contribute to improving health literacy and fostering behavioural change. Together, these interventions build a culture of shared responsibility, empowering students and staff to recognise the broader impact of their food choices and actively participate in the transition towards healthier and more sustainable food systems.

The fifth category, “Design, evaluation and monitoring”, ensures that the Polimi Food Policy becomes a structured, long-term sys-

tem that remains adaptive and aligned with the evolving needs of the university community. Its actions aim to make the campus food environment dynamic, inclusive and sustainability-oriented through an integrated approach to listening, analysis and governance. Regular surveys targeting students and staff allow the university to track shifts in demand and perceptions of the food offer, while continuous evaluation of suppliers safeguards quality, variety and coherence with environmental and social principles. These mechanisms institutionalise shared governance by embedding ongoing monitoring, KPI-based assessment and iterative policy refinement grounded in community feedback. Central to this effort is the establishment of a dedicated Food Policy Unit, which acts as a coordinating hub and co-design process for the university community and external partners. Finally, the development of a coherent Food Identity will enhance the recognisability and cultural visibility of food-related spaces and services across campus, reinforcing the policy's long-term impact and guiding behavioural change.

At the time of writing this chapter, the outcomes of the process are developing along two complementary directions. On the one hand, they are being integrated into the university's Strategic Sustainability Plan. On the other, they are beginning to inform a first set of pilot interventions focused on new modes of access to food, including group purchasing services and disintermediation initiatives; education and awareness activities, such as anti-food-waste actions; the enhancement of monitoring systems and feedback collection; and the redesign of selected spaces as environments for the experimentation of innovative and collaborative food services. Overall, these developments suggest that the Food Policy is beginning to shift from a co-designed framework toward a more consolidated operational and strategic role within the institution.

2.6 Conclusions

From a methodological standpoint, the progressive refinement trajectory presented in this chapter illustrates how co-design outputs can evolve from generative ideation into institutional policy architec-

ture. The staged filtering process, combining screening, categorical reassignment, operational validation, and strategic prioritisation, enabled the translation of participatory knowledge into administratively actionable instruments. In this sense, the refinement pathway did not dilute the participatory nature of the process. Rather, it functioned as a governance mechanism through which co-designed insights were rendered implementable within the organisational, economic, and regulatory infrastructures of the university while also acting as a prototyping phase within a broader and ongoing co-design process.

Situating this process within its spatial and institutional context further clarifies its significance. The pilot study aimed at demonstrating that the Guidelines for University Food Policies can be effectively operationalised and can serve as a structuring reference for systematising food-related initiatives at campus level. Focusing in particular on the categories of action defined within the PPP_URB framework, the study shows that these domains provide a useful operational scaffold. At the same time, they are not sufficient on their own to generate a fully optimised campus food ecosystem. Their effectiveness depends on their integration within broader institutional visions, values, and sustainability principles, which can be further articulated through food-specific policy actions.

The case also highlights the importance of enabling conditions in initiating and sustaining such transitions. Institutional leadership plays a pivotal role in activating processes, legitimising experimentation, and mobilising actors across organisational levels. However, the pathway documented here did not emerge in an institutional vacuum. It built upon pre-existing sustainability networks, participatory infrastructures, and diffused initiatives already oriented toward shared objectives. The Food Policy process thus functioned as a coordinating platform capable of aligning, nurturing and scaling these distributed efforts.

Within this framework, codesign assumed a strategic role. The PPP_URB coordinators ensured methodological continuity, guided participatory processes, and mediated between bottom-up needs and top-down strategic orientations. The collaboration between the task force, technical and administrative offices proved essential in

mapping existing initiatives, identifying operational constraints, and integrating ongoing activities into the policy framework.

More broadly, the findings underscore the importance of combining top-down governance with bottom-up engagement in the development of University Food Policies. Institutional direction must be complemented by the active participation of the university community in order to foster shared ownership, enhance legitimacy and avoid self-referential or purely managerial policy trajectories. The case suggests that participation alone is not enough: its effects depend on the presence of organisational arrangements capable of receiving, translating, and operationalising the knowledge it generates. Transparent communication of existing initiatives and of the policy process itself further strengthens trust, awareness, and collective involvement, supporting the long-term viability of food system transitions within the campus environment.

At the same time, the chapter should be read in light of some limitations. The process documented here reflects an ongoing institutional experiment rather than a completed policy cycle, and the analysis is therefore centred more on the conditions of emergence, structuring, and refinement than on the long-term effects of implementation. Some dimensions also remain only partially addressed, including the broader diversification of student participation, the systematic evaluation of impacts over time, and the extent to which the proposed actions will be absorbed into routine institutional practice. A relevant next step lies in following the policy beyond its drafting phase and into implementation, monitoring, and iterative adaptation. In this respect, the establishment of the Food Policy Commission, together with the decision to embed co-design as a structural component of the Food Policy process rather than as a one-off participatory phase, may provide the institutional continuity needed to support this transition. These arrangements can help sustain dialogue across actors and organisational levels, accompany the testing of selected actions in practice, and strengthen the feedback and monitoring mechanisms required to assess feasibility, impacts, and organisational learning over time. In this way, the policy can continue to evolve as an infrastructuring process rather than remaining a fixed institutional document.

Taken together, the chapter demonstrates how participatory design, when embedded within institutional governance structures, can function not only as a generative method but also as an institutioning process capable of shaping policy implementation pathways. In doing so, it positions universities as strategic arenas for the development of integrated, place-based food system transformations.

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Authors

Filippo Arfini, PhD and a Full Professor in Agricultural Economics at the Economic and Management Science Department of the Università degli Studi di Parma (Italy). His research focuses on the Economics of Food Quality Schemes and the Agricultural and Rural Development Policies assessment. His research has been published in several Italian and international scientific journals. President of the Master Course on Economics and Management of Sustainable Food Systems at the Università degli Studi di Parma.

Irene Bassi, Research fellow in Design at the Politecnico di Milano. She is a member of the Polimi DESIS Lab, where she collaborates on food procurement and short food value chains research activities about private and public procurement in urban areas. Since 2023, she manages SOSpesa, a service about food distribution through a solidarity network of local stakeholders, in the Nolo neighbourhood (Milan) developed within the living lab Off Campus Nolo. Since 2023, she is a teaching assistant at the School of Design of the Politecnico di Milano.

Camilla Borsani, PhD student at the School of Management of Politecnico di Milano. She is part of a research group specializing in Purchasing and Supply Management. Her research focuses on technological innovations in this field, with a deep focus on purchasing negotiations. Camilla serves as a teaching assistant for two bachelor courses: Business and Organizational Management, and Analysis and Modelling of Business Processes. She aims to integrate sustainability and innovation in procurement practices, contributing to both academic and industry advancements.

Federico Caniato, Full Professor of Supply Chain and Procurement Management at the School of Management of Politecnico di Milano. He is the director of the International Master in Digital Supply Chain Management of Polimi Graduate School of Management. He is the scientific director of the Supply Chain Finance Observatory and a scientific officer of the Food Sustainability Lab of Politecnico di Milano. He authored several international publications on various Operations and Supply Chain Management journals.

Marta Corubolo, PhD in Design and researcher at the Department of Design at Politecnico di Milano. She is a member of the Polimi DESIS Lab, a research group focused on design for social innovation and sustainability. Her work explores the role of design in supporting social innovation processes, with particular attention to urban food systems, community-centred design, and participatory approaches. She engages in research and design projects that bring together public institutions, local organisations, and communities to foster more sustainable, inclusive, and place-based forms of innovation.

Annalisa De Boni, Associate professor in Agricultural and Food Economics and Rural Appraisal at the Soil, Plant and Food Sciences Department of the Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro. Her research fields regard the economic and environmental aspects of agro-food production, with reference to innovative and sustainable production, the analysis of consumer behaviour and the marketing of agro-food products, the economy and politics of fish production and aquaculture, the regional agricultural policy and rural development. Member of

the Quality Assurance Group for the degree courses in Food Science and Technology and of the PhD Board Soil and food science.

Annalinda De Rosa, Assistant Professor at Politecnico di Milano, member of Polimi DESIS Lab. Her research investigates participatory design through situated practices and relational design. She draws on feminist, decolonial, and antispeciesist perspectives to critically interrogate the politics of place, temporality, and participation. She co-coordinated the projects *Human Cities-Smoties: Creative Works with Small and Remote Places* – Creative Europe, and *Trame Locali: Sustainable and Narrative Paths of Basso Monferrato*, NextGenerationEU (2020–25).

Giovanna Del Gaudio, PhD and Senior Lecturer in Business Economics and Management at the Economics, Management, and Institutions Department at the Università degli Studi di Naples Federico II. She has authored and reviewed numerous articles in both national and international academic journals, as well as contributed to collective volumes and monographs. Her primary research interests include open innovation, value creation and capture, artificial intelligence, and destination management and marketing.

Davide Fassi, PhD and Full professor in design at Politecnico di Milano. His research is about the relationship between space and service with a community centred approach. Awarded with XXV Compasso d'Oro in 2018 for the project campUS – incubation and settings for social practices, Ambrogino d'Oro (2022) for Off Campus Nolo, a neighborhood living lab of the Politecnico di Milano he is coordinating. Former coordinator of the Polimi Desis Lab, a research lab on design for social innovation and sustainability, and member of the DESIS network international coordination committee. Rector's delegate for cultural activities and public engagement

Valentina Giovenzana is an Associate Professor at the Department of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (DiSAA), Università degli Studi di Milano. Her research expertise spans green, non-invasive optical sensing (including VIS/NIR spectroscopy and hyperspectral imaging),

environmental sustainability assessment through Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), and the development of cost-effective, field-deployable devices for real-time quality evaluation and decision support in the agri-food sector. She also applies chemometric techniques for data analysis, multivariate modeling, and machine learning.

Marianna Guareschi, PhD and Research Fellow in Agri-food Economics at the Economic and Management Science Department of the Università degli Studi di Parma. PhD in Natural Resources and Sustainability, research line in Agroecology at the University of Cordoba. Her research activity is focusing on: the enhancement of quality local productions, sustainable rural development according to the agro-ecological approach (deepening the economic and social aspects of agroecology), localized agri-food systems (LAFS), international cooperation, food security and food sovereignty. The results of his research activity are published in several Italian and international scientific journals. She is a member of the Italian Association of Agricultural and Applied Economics (AIEAA).

Riccardo Guidetti, Full Professor and Head of the Department of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Università degli Studi di Milano, in the field of Agricultural Engineering. His research focuses on the application of Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) methodologies to evaluate environmental impacts of the agri-food sector, and the use of optical technologies for quality evaluation in the agri-food sector. He is one of the founding members of AgriFood LCA. He has served as Principal Investigator in numerous national and international research projects, including initiatives funded under the Horizon Europe program for agri-food research.

Elena Lupolo, PhD student at the Economics, Management, Institutions Department, Università degli Studi di Naples Federico II. Her research interests include food waste, consumer behavior in the agri-food industry, sustainability and circular economy.

Abhishek Dattu Narote, Research assistant at the Department of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (DiSAA) at Università degli Studi di Milano. He is both an LCA specialist and an environmental

engineer. His research expertise covers the environmental impact of agri-food value chains. He conducts cradle-to-grave product assessments, quantifies food waste, and develops multi-dimensional sustainability frameworks that integrate environmental, nutritional, and economic dimensions. He has contributed to EU-funded research programmes and peer-reviewed journals.

Giovanni Ottomano Palmisano, Researcher in Agricultural and Food Economics and Rural Appraisal at the at the Soil, Plant and Food Sciences Department of the Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro. His current research activities are carried out within the project Research and innovation network on food and nutrition Sustainability, Safety and Security, and focuses on the development of innovative approaches for the assessment of sustainability of food supply chains, by defining tailored tools, indicators and data. These activities include also the analysis and development of good practices for new organizational and management models to improve the accessibility to sustainable food products and foster the socio-economic equity

Alessandro Perego, Vice Rector for Sustainable Development and Societal Impact at Politecnico di Milano and Full Professor of Logistics and Supply Chain Management. A member of the Executive Board and former Department Director, he was awarded Cavaliere of the Italian Republic for COVID-19 support. Founder of Sustainable Food Lab and Digital Innovation Observatories, he has over 25 years' experience in digital technologies. Author of 150+ publications, he holds roles in Digital360, AMAT, Number1 Logistics and Tesisquare.

Donatella Privitera, Full professor of Geography. She teaches geography with implications for tourism, environmental changes, and urbanization processes at the University of Catania, Italy. Her research focuses primarily on topics in economic geography, food and tourism. In particular, she deals with: territorial valorization purposes with a focus on gastronomic tourism; sustainability and sustainable cities. She is the author of books as well as more than 100 journal articles and book chapters. She has been involved in several national and international research projects on food policies and food tourism.

Stefano Quaglia, urban environmental planner and Assistant Professor at the School of Management, Politecnico di Milano. His work focuses on urban food governance, circular food-sharing initiatives, and urban forestry and agroforestry, collaborating with public, third sector, and private actors. He has worked as a researcher and practitioner with Wageningen Environmental Research, FAO, and the Town and Country Planning Association, building expertise in urban environmental policy, governance, and local food systems planning and management.

Massimiliano Renna, Associate Professor of Vegetable Crops at the Soil, Plant, and Food Sciences Department at the Università degli Studi di Bari. He serves as the President of the Academy of Mediterranean Biodiversity Sciences and is a member of the Italian Society of Horticulture. His research focuses on enhancing and preserving key aspects of agro-biodiversity. This includes: i) documenting and safeguarding knowledge and memories related to biodiversity; ii) identifying and retrieving landraces within the region; iii) characterizing, cataloging, and preserving these varieties. Additionally, he applies food technologies to uncover quality traits and promote agro-biodiversity as a mean to advance sustainable dietary practices.

Rocco Roma, Associate professor of Agriculture Economics at the Soil, Plant and Food Sciences Department of the Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro. His studies focused on: i) the relationship between the agri-food production systems and the environment; ii) the effects of sector policies, and governance system in general, on the development of primary productive sectors in rural areas; iii) food supply chain consumer behavior's towards innovative food processes and products and their economic and social effects on food security and food access.

Pietro Santamaria, Full professor in vegetable crops at Università degli Studi di Bari. He teaches at the Master Degree Course Agricultural and Environmental Science and at the Master Degree Course Plant medicine. Principal Investigator in many research projects. Won two scientific awards: Bram Steiner Award 2016 on Soilless Culture for the

article A targeted management of the nutrient solution in a soilless tomato crop according to plant needs (Signore, Serio & Santamaria, *Frontiers in Plant Science*) and Vegetable Publication Award 2014 for the article Grafting Improves Tomato Salinity Tolerance through Sodium Partitioning within the Shoot (Di Gioia, Signore, Serio & Santamaria, *HortScience*).

Alessandro Scuderi, Professor of Agricultural and food economics at the Università degli Studi di Catania, Italy. He has been a member of the Italian Society of Agricultural Economics (SIDEA) since 2003 and member of the Italian LCA Network since 2017. The scientific career he has dealt with issues related to economics and agricultural policy and specifically he has specialized on sustainability, production systems and process and product innovations. He has published 172 scientific papers in national and international journals as well as participating at international level in the main conferences on agri-food production.

Irene Selvaggio, PhD student in Educational Processes, Theoretical-Transformative Models and Research Methods Applied to the Territory at the Educational Sciences Department of the Università degli Studi di Catania. Her research focuses on analyzing the relationship between urban areas and disadvantaged individuals, with particular attention to territorial development models and social inclusion processes. In this context, she studies how urban gardens can positively impact the quality of life and promote the well-being of vulnerable communities.

Fabiana Sepe, PhD and Lecturer at the Economics, Management, Institutions Department, Università degli Studi di Naples Federico II. She is author of some book chapters and articles on national and international journals in the fields of management, tourism, and agri-food industry. She has attended several national and international conferences with co-authored papers. Her main research interests include but are not limited to knowledge management, strategy, consumer behaviour and artificial intelligence, concentrating upon the application of open innovation perspectives.

Teresa Tugliani, PhD student in *Advanced Research in Economics and Management* at the Department of Economics and Management, University of Parma. Her doctoral research examines the governance structures and sustainability of Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs). Involved in the ONFOODS project (NRRP - NextGenerationEU), her research has focused on: governance and farmers' participation dynamics within SFSCs, particularly within Farmers' Markets; sustainability reporting among agrifood Small and Medium-sized Enterprises; and the role of Agrifood Wholesale Markets in urban food distribution and urban food policies.

Carla Zarbà, Researcher in Rural Economics and Estimates at the Agriculture, Food and Environment Department of the Università degli Studi di Catania. Her research interests include international trade analysis, business sector analysis, consumer behaviour analysis, animal welfare, etc. She teaches Food Legislation within the Bachelor's Degree in Food Science and Technology and Agri-food Markets and Distribution Systems within the Bachelor's Degree in Management of firms for sustainable economy - 2nd Year Program. She is a member of the Italian Society of Agri-Food Economics and the Italian Society of Agricultural Economics.



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La passione per le conoscenze

Universities are increasingly recognised as key actors in the transition towards more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient food systems. As complex socio-technical environments, where food is variously produced, procured, distributed, consumed, and embedded within spatial, organisational, and social practices, university campuses can be understood as *cities within the city*, offering unique opportunities to connect policy, design, and everyday life.

This book presents the results of the *PPP-URB* project, developed within the PNRR OnFoods research, and explores how universities can design and implement integrated food policies by acting across multiple dimensions, including procurement, services, spaces, community engagement, and short food supply chains. The volume introduces a set of guidelines for university food policies and investigates their application through prototyping activities carried out in different Italian institutional contexts. Bringing together contributions from multiple disciplines and universities, the book shows how campuses can function as living laboratories for food system innovation, where strategic visions are translated into concrete actions through participatory and design-driven approaches. By linking research, experimentation, and policy-making, it offers both a conceptual framework and practical insights for scholars, practitioners, and policy-makers engaged in food system transformation.