

# Disrupting from the ground up: community-led and place-based food governance in London during COVID-19

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vulnerability of the urban food system by interrupting global food chains and restricting human mobility. This has impacted food security at the local level, with urban communities not been able to access food as before. In response, newly formed governance mechanisms and policies have emerged on the ground, disrupting existing governance frameworks. This paper examines such developments in London to understand how urban food is governed; and, what has been disruptive and how disruption in access to food has been governed during COVID-19. To do so, it draws on policy analysis, case study research and interview data. The paper finds disconnection between the national and metropolitan level and fragmentation between the metropolitan and municipal level of urban food governance; with food security being addressed via people-focused approaches which are generously complemented by third sector and community-led initiatives. It also finds that food disruption in London during COVID-19 is defined by the emergence of novel community-led and place-based organisations and policies, especially at the municipal level, which challenge existing food governance structures – the Hackney Food Network and Food Transition Plans being such examples. This creates new spaces of food governance and influence, and change, from the ground up existing governance frameworks. The paper reflects on the role of urban planning in putting ‘space’ back into urban food governance debates and concludes with implications for scaling-up and theory.

## 1. Introduction

With 60% of the urban population estimated to live in cities by 2030 (UN 2020), the urban food system needs to become more efficient in producing, distributing and consuming food which is healthy, available to all, meaningfully connected to local contexts and environmentally sound (Barthel & Isendahl, 2018; Kaiser et al., 2021; Lim, 2014). This has become even more important during the COVID-19 pandemic (COVID-19 thereafter), which has highlighted the vulnerability of global and commercialised food chains (Batini, Lomax, & Mehra, 2020) and showed how access to urban food has reframed urban food governance in the context of human mobility restrictions at the ‘last mile’ of food (Turcu, Li, & Xu, 2022). Here, the interdependencies between the food system and urban system are apparent, with the urban foodscapes depending on how the food environment expands or contracts in response to constraints such as those imposed by COVID-19.

The urban system and food system are both complex socio-ecological systems compounded by economic, institutional and social relationships that exist between different actors who are closely connected to each

other (Lang, 2020; Lim, 2014). However, food remains little ‘integrated’ at the urban level: many cities and their inhabitants are disconnected from their food – e.g. where it comes from, how it is produced, the impact food production and consumption have on the environment, climate and health, and the complexity and fragility of food chains; moreover, the way in which cities deal with food is highly variable and often fragmented. A response to this has been a series of alternative community-led and place-based urban food organisations and initiatives such as food policy councils, trans-local food networks and local food strategies which have emerged in cities more recently. These initiatives form new spaces for urban food governance and are the result of grassroots pressures for a more local, inclusive, accessible and fairer urban foodscapes (Lim, 2014; Moragues-Faus & Sonnino, 2019; Sonnino, 2021). They are unexpected and seen as disruptive in a qualitative way i.e. positively disruptive to established structures because they are able to rapidly catalyse collective action and offer locally relevant solutions, deliver emergency services and create resilience roadmaps.

Emerging evidence suggests that similar disruptive and community-led organisations and initiatives might have emerged in cities during

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COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions (LSE Cities, UCLG & Metropolis, 2020), in response to food insecurity challenges at the community level, and in particular access to food. However, little is known so far about their nature, how they fit into existing urban food policy and governance frameworks and whether, indeed, they have been disruptive – that is, whether they have changed these structures for the better by making them more resilient to shocks in the food chain and more effective at addressing the food security needs of local communities. This paper aims to examine such developments in London and one of its municipalities, the London Borough of Hackney (Hackney thereafter). It draws on policy analysis, case study research and six interviews to answer three research questions:

*How access to food in urban communities is governed (RQ1: how governed);*

*What has been disruptive in access to food during COVID-19 (RQ2: what is disruptive); and*

*How access to food during COVID-19 has been governed (RQ3: how disruption is governed).*

The paper makes a few important contributions. Theoretically, the paper contributes to urban debates on community-led and place-based food governance. It also defines disruption in access to urban food as novel, unexpected organisations and initiatives that emerge to address food insecurity challenges, pushing against conventional thinking and, ultimately, changing for the better traditional policy and governance frameworks (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021; Mutius, 2018). More broadly, it also touches on the informal production and re-production of cities and counter-democracy debates. Empirically, it adds to the emerging literature on COVID-19 impact at the local level in cities; and unpacks a detailed account of community-led responses to food access and food insecurity in London and Hackney during this time.

Following from this introduction, the paper is framed theoretically by drawing on concepts from urban food governance, community food security and disruptive innovation debates. Next, it outlines its methodology, to then turn to a detailed examination of urban food governance and access to food in London and Hackney during COVID-19. Following from that, the paper discusses how urban food is governed, the disruptive nature of community-led and place-based COVID-19 response, and the emergence of new spaces of food governance that push from the ground up for change in existing governance structures. The paper concludes with implications for scaling-up and scaling-out, and wider theoretical reflections.

## 2. Urban food governance, community food security and disruption

The current pace of urbanisation and growth of megacities, have put cities at the centre of food security debates (Dury, Bendjebbar, Hainzelin, Giordano, & Bricas, 2019). Cities are emerging as food policy innovators relying on *‘their political and economic power to design new types of food systems that transcend simplistic dichotomies between the local and global scale and between urban and rural development’* (Morgan & Sonnino, 2010, 222). They are also seen as playing an important role in promoting sustainable food systems via fostering cooperation and self-organization such as food networks, community supported agriculture and food hubs (Biel, 2016). However, the complexity of the urban food system requires new and continually shaping food governance mechanisms in response to changes in urban conditions (Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015). This has been discussed in governance studies under two schools of thought. First, the multilevel governance of food, or so-called ‘food city-ism’, examines the multi-scale governance of urban food from a city-centred perspective and draws on socio-technical agendas of ‘smart’, ‘territorially integrated’ and ‘resilient’ urbanisation (Sonnino & Coulson, 2020). Second, there are debates on the ‘localization’ of food governance which view food as a determinant of people’s wellbeing. Here, cities are seen as ‘spaces of deliberation’ with new institutional arrangements that are constantly debated

and constituted from the bottom-up (Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015). Within this context, food can form the basis of a ‘social economy’ which is non-capitalist because it is unregulated and non-monetary, and social because it directly connects people with food by prioritising social and environmental justice over economic value (Edwards, 2016). Examples include food policy councils, place-based food partnerships (Lever, Sonnino, & Cheetham, 2019), transnational configurations such as the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (Moragues-Faus & Sonnino, 2019) and local food strategies (Moragues et al., 2013; Sonnino & Spayde, 2014). These are local and multi-stakeholder food governance responses led and driven from the grassroots which provide practical and contextualised solutions to local food concerns such as food access, urban farming, stakeholders’ engagement and food poverty (Halliday & van Veenhuizen, 2019). Local or community-led mobilization around urban food starts from the premise that food is more visible ‘in place’, where food policymaking is determined by context and occurs through local and informal connections and meshing of traditional and emerging decision-making structures (Moragues et al., 2013; Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015). Within localization debates of food governance, much attention has been dedicated to the role of urban actors, such as civil society representatives, community groups and social movements, who actively shape urban food policy by engaging with local governments to fill a food policy and welfare vacuum and rescale food policymaking at the community level (Sonnino, 2019). By doing so, they enact participatory food governance frameworks which identify policy needs and contribute to policy success at the local level, but also apply pressure from the community to the higher levels of food policymaking (Stierand, 2011), and create new spaces of citizen governance which challenge conventional thinking and can lead to change or disruption in traditional policy and governance frameworks (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021).

Community-based and participatory food initiatives are viewed as providing more sustainable solutions to food insecurity in the long term, by empowering individuals and increasing local food knowledge and skills. They have laid the grounds for community food security thinking in the 1990s which undertakes a food system perspective on achieving food security in urban areas and focuses on establishing community infrastructure and food governance mechanisms that fit a particular context. ‘Community’ refers here to a specific geography or ‘place’, local political economic systems, and demographic of food security (Hamm & Bellows, 2003), while ‘food security’ represents *‘a community need, rather than an individual’s condition, associated with hunger’* (Gottlieb & Fisher, 1996, 24). A community is food secure when all its members have access to *‘safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice’* (Hamm & Bellows, 2003, 37). Adopting a community food security perspective to the urban context implies cross-mobilization of local stakeholders to improve food access and diets at community level, which can be done via short or long-term strategies to local food security (McCullum, Desjardins, Kraak, Ladipo, & Costello, 2005); advocate locally grown, seasonal or organic food (Williams, 2012); and achieve integration at different stages in the policy process (McCullum, Pelletier, Barr, & Wilkins, 2002). More specifically, community food security thinking has been applied in the context of planning for sustainable and healthy communities (Pothukuchi, 2004); making urban agriculture address food poverty in low income neighbourhoods (Meenar & Hoover, 2012); and geographies of food supply (Joassart-Marcelli, Rossiter, & Bosco, 2017). Community food security approaches provide both an alternative and critique to mainstream food policy: they provide a more comprehensive perspective and connect food system activities to community objectives, but also counteract a traditional focus on the national and household level of food security, by viewing the community as *‘an indispensable unit of solution to food problems’* (Pothukuchi, 2004, 357). How these approaches are governed can be discussed through the lens of collaborative governance, which argues, amongst others, that collective decisions are reached faster when ‘disruptive thinking’ occurs (Sørensen & Torfing, 2021).

Disruptive thinking is seen to foster adaptation and increase resilience in unstable environments (Mutius, 2018) and builds on disruptive innovation debates which look at how new technologies entering the market from the bottom, grow in influence, to ultimately change the whole system (Christensen, 2016). Disruption can be seen as something unexpected or novel, but also as challenging conventional thinking or traditional policy and governance frameworks, more widely (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021). Cities are ideal arenas for disruption (Dixon, Lannon, & Eames, 2018). Here, disruption is seen as a pre-condition to accelerate sustainability transitions (Kuokkanen, Uusitalo, & Koistinen (2019) but also as a challenge to the ways in which, usually, goods and services are delivered and markets are organised and so, impacting on the structure and organisation of cities (Maginn, Burton, & Legacy, 2018). The concept is mainly employed to discuss how various technologies (i.e. automation, renewable energy, AI, blockchain, GM, robotics, nano-technology etc.) bring about profound change in the urban transportation sector (e.g. electric or automated vehicles), energy system (e.g. distributed energy supply) or food farming (e.g., vertical farming, hydroponics, aeroponics, aquaculture and aquaponics). However, urban disruption is not only technology-driven and can change cities from the top or from the bottom. Global events such as human migration, economic shocks, wars or pandemics such as COVID-19, usually trigger profound and unexpected change in how cities function (Dixon et al., 2018) which raise wider questions about implications for urban policy and governance (Leitner & Stiefmueller, 2019). Maginn et al. (2018), however, argue that most urban disruption is incremental and from the ground up, hence not immediately visible or measurable. In this case, a major challenge for cities is to identify disruption and understand how to adapt to it, while providing socially equitable and sustainable changes. Communities and institutions on the ground respond in different ways in the face of disruption and this can provide important insights into governing disruption and production of new models of urbanism such as ‘informal urbanism’ and ‘disruptive urbanism’ (Acuto, Dinardi, & Marx, 2019; Dovey, 2012; Iveson, Lyons, Clark, & Weir, 2019; Maginn et al., 2018). In the fragmented and uncertain environment following disruption, communities are innovative, push boundaries and expose problems or inefficiencies in existing structures; they proceed in the unknown and experiment as they go. These unconventional ways of working can cause governance disruption by opening-up new governance spaces (Maginn et al., 2018). By contrast, local institutions often struggle to accommodate or adapt to these new and disruptive governance landscapes (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021; Williams & Shepherd, 2021; Majchrzak, 2007). Both communities and institutions, however, work towards the common goal of providing fast, flexible and localised solutions that tackle sudden challenges. This is negotiated within the space of local governance networks which is capable to catalyse a multitude of stakeholders, build trust and coordinate actions, but also able to challenge established roles and relationships of relevant actors and institutions, and further, potentially able to unsettle dominant discourses and entire systems (Davoudi & Madanipour, 2015). One such example is (Edwards, 2016) ‘social food economies’ which exist on the margins of the current market-dominated food system and are socially disruptive by integrating people, product and place together to foster social change and more sustainable food systems (Edwards (2016)).

In sum, this paper is framed theoretically by drawing on concepts, first, in the urban food governance literature to anchor food governance into urban context via place-based food approaches, which promise a more just, representational and locally-relevant access to food in the city. Second, it delves into community food security studies, which emphasise the role of communities or community-led groups of multiple stakeholders in urban food governance frameworks and in facilitating access to food for all. These ideas frame the paper’s first research question (RQ1: *how governed*). COVID-19 is viewed as an unprecedented challenge in the normal functioning of cities due to restrictions imposed on human and food movement amongst others. Hence, the paper draws next on disruption thinking to frame COVID-19 responses to access food

in urban communities. Disruption is defined here as sudden change in the landscapes of actors and policymaking (i.e. unexpected/new actors or policy) which challenge or upend traditional governance frameworks. This frames the paper’s second research question (RQ2: *what is disruptive*). Furthermore, disruption can change the dynamics of local governance landscapes through the emergence of new spaces of community governance but also can trigger more profound change, beyond the community level, of dominant urban food policy and governance frameworks. This frames the paper’s third research question (RQ3: *how disruption is governed*).

### 3. Methodology

The study employed a three-tier sequential qualitative research design (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017), drawing on policy analysis, case study research and interview data to answer its three research questions. The first stage of research involved analysis of food and urban planning policy at the national, metropolitan (London) and municipal (Hackney) level to unpack urban food governance in relation to community access to food in urban areas (RQ1: *how governed*). More specifically, we have looked at the [London Plan \(2021\)](#), [London Food Strategy \(2018\)](#), [Hackney Local Plan \(2020\)](#) and [Hackney Food Poverty Action Plan \(2019\)](#). The content of these policy documents were thematically analysed to understand how urban food governance is enacted in the UK and its effects on urban areas at the community level.

Second, the research focused on the case of London and one of its municipalities, Hackney, to unpack a more detailed understanding of responses to access food at community level during COVID-19. By corroborating metropolitan and municipal policy documents, grey literature and interview material (see below), COVID-19-emerging or disruptive urban actors and policy mechanisms were identified and analysed (RQ2: *what is disruptive*). London’s governance system is based on a hierarchical two-tier structure: the metropolitan level of the Greater London Authority (GLA), made of the Mayor of London and the London Assembly; and local level of 33 boroughs (Travers, 2018). The GLA does not hold supervisory powers on the boroughs, which are responsible for the delivery of local services such as planning and social security (Pilgrim, 2006). By the end of 2021, London underwent three national lockdowns (16 March - June 2020; 5 November - 2 December 2020; and 6 January to March 2021) and was preparing for a fourth one in the autumn of 2021, due to the Omicron variant. Hackney was selected for three reasons: it is the second most deprived borough in London (DLUHC 2019) and displays high levels of food poverty (Hackney, 2019); it has a dynamic third sector and community landscape and its community-based response to food access during COVID-19 has been repeatedly reported in the media (Chant, 2021; Hutton, 2021; Oluwalana, 2021). Finally, the researchers worked with the borough before – this facilitated access to local organisations and data collection during challenging COVID-19 times.

Third, six semi-structured interviews were conducted in Hackney in the summer of 2021, between the end of the third national lockdown and the emergence of the Omicron variant, in autumn. Interviewees were selected via purposive sampling, to represent stakeholders involved in urban food governance at the community level such as local government officers, elected politicians, community representatives and third sector organizations. The interviews were instrumental to understand in further detail COVID-19-related disruption factors such as emerging community based actors and new policy mechanisms (RQ2: *what is disruptive*), and more importantly, unpack newly created spaces of governance around access to food in urban communities as well as how these impacted further on existing urban food policy and governance (RQ3: *how disruption is governed*). The interview protocol collected data across three broad themes: 1. general information (e.g. organisation background, approach to food security); 2. the ‘what’ of community response during COVID-19 (e.g. new/ emergent food actors and policy); and 3. the ‘how’ of community response (e.g. new spaces of governance;

their potential for broader interaction/ influence.) All interviews were conducted online due COVID-19 restrictions and lasted up to one hour. The interview data was manually coded; all interviews were recorded and only parts relevant to this analysis were transcribed.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Governing access to food

The UK does not have a unitary national food policy or a dedicated food ministry. Different aspects of food policy are addressed by four government bodies: the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) – which is the main department involved in the formulation of national food policy by setting national food standards, defining food labelling criteria except for nutrition or food safety information, dealing with food imports, exports and food production; the Food Standards Agency (FSA) – which manages the food safety aspects of food labelling and investigates food related incidents in the UK (e.g., deceptive labelling and food frauds); the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) – which carries out some food related public health activities (e.g. obesity, healthy diets, nutrition labelling etc.); and Public Health England (PHE) – which identifies and investigates outbreaks of foodborne infections (Parsons, Barling, & Lang, 2018). The UK relies on a ‘replenish-as-you-go’ or ‘just-in-time’ food chain, which stretches far beyond UK borders, especially into Europe (Shanks, 2020) with an estimated 47% of food, including 84% fresh food, being imported (Mozaffarian, Angell, Lang, & Rivera, 2018). Large cities like London do not have large warehouse facilities for food storage hence, the urban food system has low capacity to absorb disruption (Rayner, 2020). A recurring national concern is food security at the household level which is addressed by the integration of welfare provision such as the *universal credit*, a monthly payment to (means-tested) households living in poverty, with local government provision including *meals-on-wheels* – home-delivered meals to those unable to purchase or prepare their own – and *free-school-meals* – provided to school children living in poverty.

The current British welfare provision, however, has been criticised for not efficiently reaching out to all of those in need (Food Foundation 2021; Power, Pybus, Pickett, & Doherty, 2021; Whitehead, Taylor-Robinson, & Barr, 2021); for example, 18% of British households experienced food poverty in 2019 (Fuller, Bankiewicz, Davies, Mandalia, & Stocker, 2019). This is the result of British welfare liberalisation since 2010, which has seen a shift in approach from a finely grained combination of people- and place-based provision to a more unitary and people-based model of welfare (Bentley & Pugalís, 2014). The response has been a nationally acknowledged dependence on foodbank provision that counteracts for a retracting welfare state and provides relief and alleviation for the symptoms of food insecurity and poverty at the community level (Lambie-Mumford, 2013). Examples include here organisations such as Trussell Trust, UK Foodbank Network, UK Mutual Aid and the Selby Trust at the national level, but also a myriad of **food networks and partnerships** which have emerged at the community level to tackle food security concerns locally and across urban sectors (Sustain 2020a). For example, by 2017 around 50 cross-sector food partnerships were set up in UK as part of Sustainable Food Cities movement (Davies, 2017). These organisations typically rely on formal or informal structures; some are hosted by the public sector organizations and staffed by civil servants, others are supported by third sector organizations or fully independent, with little resources available and relying on volunteers (Davies, 2017).

British cities do not have dedicated food policies or strategies and, mayors, where in place, have limited powers. However, London is an exception: it has an elected mayor (Mayor of London) and governance body (Greater London Authority or GLA), and it employs a ‘food in all policies’ strategy (Parsons, Lang, & Barling, 2021) in order to achieve other policy goals such as better health, circularity, carbon reductions and community engagement. Two of its city-wide policies speak directly

to the Mayor’s ambition to integrate food across the policy and governance spectrum. First, the **London Food Strategy** (2018) is a pan-London commitment to food policymaking which recognizes that food is connected to everything Londoners do, and that access to healthy and sustainable food for all is important (Mayor of London 2018); and signposts London’s concerns about food poverty, child obesity and unhealthy food environments (Hawkes & Parsons, 2019). The Strategy is implemented by the **London Food Programme**, a city-wide body which aims to integrate food into other London strategies, in partnership with private, public and third sector partners. **Sustain** is one such partner who shapes and monitors the delivery of the Strategy at the local level via the formulation of Food Poverty Action Plans. Another partner is the **London Food Board**, made of experts from academia, third and private sector, that provides advice on London’s food priorities. Second, the **London Plan** (2021) is the city’s long-term spatial development strategy. Although the Plan does not refer directly to the London Food Strategy, a number of its policies focus on food issues in spatial context such as healthy food (e.g. healthy foodscapes for all, restricting unhealthy food options such as take-aways near schools); food access and food waste (e.g. in housing development); and food growing (e.g. in green space, near education facilities; allotments; urban agriculture; meanwhile use; allocation of Metropolitan Open Land) (Mayor of London, 2021). The focus on food growing and urban agriculture has been particularly strong hence, the Plan directly supports the **Capital Growth Network** which promotes community food growing across the capital, as well as delivering food-growing skills and employment opportunities for Londoners (Mayor of London, 2021).

At the borough level, the Mayor’s powers are limited, however, a range of local governance mechanisms exist to address food issues – see Marceau (2021) for a detailed discussion. The **Borough Food Sub-Group** (BFSG) is a mechanism to lobby views up the governance chain, to the London Food Board. It is made of municipal public health and community engagement teams and, its main aim is to reduce food policy fragmentation across the boroughs and London level (Hawkes & Parsons, 2019). The two strategies that address food at the borough level are the **Local Plans** – local spatial strategies, relatively aligned with the London Plan (2021), – and **Food Poverty Action Plans** – which translate the London Food Strategy (2018) at the local level. These local strategies are not legally bound by their London-counterparts but take direction from them in relation to the localisation of food production via community allotments and urban farming; responsible food consumption and distribution; food donations and wastage (Mayor of London, 2021). The Food Poverty Action Plans have only started to emerge in London and are a reflection of the Mayor’s ambition to tackle food poverty beyond foodbank emergency responses, in partnership with private and third sector actors. They can be initiated by local food networks, alliances or partnerships, the borough itself or a third sector organization; have no binding powers; and only present a set of local policy recommendations to improve food security in the borough (Sustain 2019b). To date, 17 out of 33 boroughs have developed Food Poverty Action Plans in a three-step multi-level process that aims to tackle local food poverty and lack of healthy food: *food structure* (targeting the cost of food and welfare provision), *food resilience* (looking at food growing space, communities of food and sharing surplus) and *food emergency* (where foodbank aid is viewed as a last resort) (Hackney 2021b). The boroughs’ progress in meeting food poverty objectives against these plans is reviewed every year in ‘Beyond the Foodbank’ report (Sustain 2019a).

### 4.2. Food disruption during COVID-19 in London

Levels of food insecurity increased in London during COVID-19 which were triggered lack of economic (due to loss of employment) and physical (due to movement restrictions) access to food. Already vulnerable groups were disproportionately affected, and new vulnerabilities emerged, with third sector organisations and foodbanks placed under unprecedented demand; existing food aid initiatives were also

compromised due to closure of venues and volunteers falling ill with COVID-19. The GLA, boroughs and communities worked alongside to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on food, and third-sector organisations such as Trussell Trust, City Harvest, UK Mutual Aid, Foodbank Network and Selby Trust worked tirelessly to make food accessible at the community level (Turcu et al., 2022). In the beginning, London relied mostly on its existing governance structures to monitor the impact, distribute food and financial support, and share intelligence and resources across its territory – one of our interviewees reported that London had already assessed the impact of a ‘no deal Brexit’ on its food supply chain and that was instrumental in shaping COVID-19 responses. Thus, when COVID-19 hit, the city was relatively prepared for emergency planning and the strategy in place actually reflected previous predictions of a “no deal Brexit” (e.g., shocks to the food supply chain and panic buying). However, novel organisations and policies – such as the **London Food Alliance, Community Harvest and Food Transition Plans** – quickly emerged at the metropolitan and municipal level to address gaps in access to food at the community level and disrupting existing urban food governance frameworks.

One interviewee told us that early in the pandemic, the London Food Board convened a group of some 150 people from across London to discuss emergency food planning. From this a new body emerged at the end of March 2020, the **London Food Alliance**, with the aim to ‘maintain a fluid food supply in all areas of London and provide emergency food when necessary’ while working closely with local food groups and communities ‘to find the lead in each borough to help with Community Food Hubs and food distribution, and collect local data on food poverty’ (Interviewee 4). Between March and August 2020, the London Food Alliance helped to distribute 7850 tonnes of food, the equivalent of 18,692,953 meals (Weeks & Ainsbury, 2020). Another interviewee reported how the London’s Capital Growth Network launched in July 2020 the **Community Harvest** initiative which provided community gardens with tools, materials and advice to grow more food locally (Capital, 2021).

*Through a package of support, [Community Harvest] helped urban gardens and growers increase their production and reach out to people and groups, particularly those who were most vulnerable, including older people, those with health conditions or with disabilities, and people on a lower income. Gardens reached out and built long term relationships with community organisations. Feedback from garden leaders showed that it enabled more people to get involved in community gardens, providing access to nature, and building personal resilience. We also saw more councils engage in food growing, with 265 attending a webinar discussing how to support more community food growing in the future. An estimated 5.5 tonnes of hyper-local fresh food were distributed to an estimated 6945 households with recipient organisations including mutual aid groups, food banks, children’s centres, a women’s centre, elderly lunch clubs and residents of a local housing estate” (Interviewee 5).*

During the two national lockdowns, most boroughs took a humanitarian approach to local food security issues, as well as offered specific support to food businesses – cafés or restaurants were supported to set up food delivery services in partnership with UberEATS or Deliveroo or prepare for re-opening when lockdown restrictions were lifted (Guerlaine, 2020). Since summer 2021, the GLA have been assisting London boroughs developing **Food Transition Plans**, setting out ongoing arrangements for food support during the transition to recovery, monitoring food supplies, levels of needs and supporting campaigns for improving food security (Weeks & Ainsbury, 2020). Food Transition Plans are new and unprecedented policy mechanisms, partially overlapping with provision in existing Local Plans and Food Poverty Action Plans, to secure food aid and address growing food insecurity during the pandemic (Sustain, 2020b). Food transition plans also outline how food aid organisations must ensure that residents affected by the economic, social, and health impacts of COVID-19 receive the support they need at the municipal level (Sustain, 2020b). It is early to say how these three types of plans will interact with each other, but their overlap and

potential for integrated action around urban access to food has been made even clearer during COVID-19.

#### 4.3. New spaces of food governance in Hackney

Prior to COVID-19, two food governance mechanisms were in place in Hackney: **Hackney Food Justice Alliance**, previously called Hackney Food Poverty Alliance, and the **Hackney Food Poverty Action Plan**. The former was established in 2018 to address food security in Hackney via empowering those experiencing food insecurity; mapping existing food justice initiatives in the borough and improving the circulation of information and best practice around food security. It started as a coalition of over 40 local organisations, to grow and involve at the height of COVID-19 over 100 organisations from public health, education, faith, food and community sectors (Hackney 2021a). The latter was formulated in 2019, based on the model provided by Sustain and within Hackney’s wider strategy on poverty alleviation. It focuses on three objectives: improving food emergency provision, building food resilience and prevent food poverty; to be delivered via coordination of and collaboration with local food growers, food waste charities and providers, shops and market stalls (Hackney, 2019). Novel organisations and initiatives, however, emerged during COVID-19 within this pre-existing governance framework, including Community Food Hubs and the Hackney Food Network.

Right from the beginning COVID-19 in March 2020, the municipality provided food parcels for shielding residents via a new helpline and set up three **Community Food Hubs** for food storage at the London’s Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, Hackney City Farm and City of London. It also surveyed the Hackney Food Justice Alliance’s members to understand the support they needed and set up a mailing list to provide updates. One interviewee told us:

Hackney Council provided community spaces for storage and food delivery for the Hackney Food Bank but also various other organisations. For example, the Hackney City Farm was also used as a central storage point where different groups of organisations used to go and collect food. Other organizations, including the Felix Project, were collecting food from a big warehouse in the City of London (Interviewee 1).

By July 2020, the municipality stopped distribution of food and partnered with the Hackney Food Justice Alliance to form the **Hackney Food Network**, a frontline delivery network, to address ongoing local food security at the community level (Hackney 2021b).

*As we continued to hear that multiple groups were offering food in the borough, we decided to bring them all together and create the Hackney Food Network. The network has proven to be very successful in providing logistical support for local food storage, delivery, coordination amongst volunteers, funding applications, and food supplies’ improvement. So, while the Food Justice Alliance mainly brings together food growers and those interested in sustainability issues, the Food Network represents a frontline delivery network. We now meet monthly with other partners and have a weekly newsletter. In the beginning, we had different breakout meetings depending on what the greatest needs were: for example, we held a meeting to help those looking for food storage spaces or those interested in applying for funding... we helped community organisations get funding through the Community Grants Programme, particularly those offering frontline emergency response, but we also supported groups by providing advice on how to apply for funding from wider grant bodies, particularly the London Community Response Fund (Interviewee 2).*

The Hackney Food Network was established to source food, volunteers and intelligence, but also to provide advice and support to local communities and food businesses in need and cater for cultural and dietary needs. To do so, it acted as a new space of governance which relied on over 1500 volunteers, ‘working directly with the Volunteer Centre Hackney to coordinate them across the borough’ (Interviewee 1); setting up local consortia and smaller spin-off networks which enabled organizations in the same locality but with different expertise to collaborate together. This was ‘very helpful when people tested positive and needed help

with food delivery...consortia worked together to geographically cover the entire borough, each with groups of around five to six providers, all working together in the same area” (Interviewee 1). Since April 2020, the Hackney Food Network has provided over 400,000 food parcels and cooked meals (Hackney 2021), while working with Hackney’s other services (e.g. community halls, public health and social security) and is considered today a community partnership network which ‘helps the council on the ground to provide food, but also provides advice and support to the council’ (Interviewee 1).

The Hackney Food Network was one of the most innovative solutions established to provide a local food response during the pandemic. It was part of a larger community partnership effort. We are now using a place-based approach so that local groups can share their expertise in the area where they operate with other local organizations. All these organizations did not used to work together. Now, the Hackney Food Network has also started to work in partnership with Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) and has been able to provide holistic form of support locally combining health and food responses. Specifically, CCGs are developing neighbourhood-based health services and we are aligning that work with our local place-based food support. So, we started targeting the neighbourhood level for our service delivery. We have noticed that this approach improves community cohesion and well-being. So, the main policy innovation has been moving from a privately commissioned to a consortium and a place-based model of service delivery (Interviewee 2).

Today, the Hackney Food Network is working alongside the borough to re-frame its local food poverty policy post-COVID (i.e. Hackney Food

Transition Plan), via facilitating place-based collaborations between third sector partners, community groups and businesses and delivering holistic forms of support to residents in need. Hence, it forms a new, still not ‘institutionalized’, space of community-led food governance, which has focused on access to food for all during COVID-19, and it is now starting to impact on food policymaking and governance at the municipal level.

### 5. Discussion

This paper aimed to unpack the governance of urban food at community level in relation to food security and, more specifically, access to food (how governed) and, draw a picture of COVID-19 disruption by identifying new actors and policy mechanisms that challenged traditional food governance frameworks in London (what was disruptive) and new spaces of community-led governance in Hackney (how disruption was governed). This is schematically summarised in Fig. 1.

How governed? Today, food security and access to food is governed in the UK from the top via people-focused benefits (e.g. universal credit, meals-on-wheels, free-school-meals), the result of a shrinking welfare state over the past two decades. This has determined an over-reliance on third sector food aid and foodbanks to fill the gaps in welfare provision (Lambie-Mumford, 2013). There is a clear disconnect between national and urban food governance, and British cities do not have urban food strategies except for London. The example of London shows that urban food governance is further fragmented and shaped by local conditions

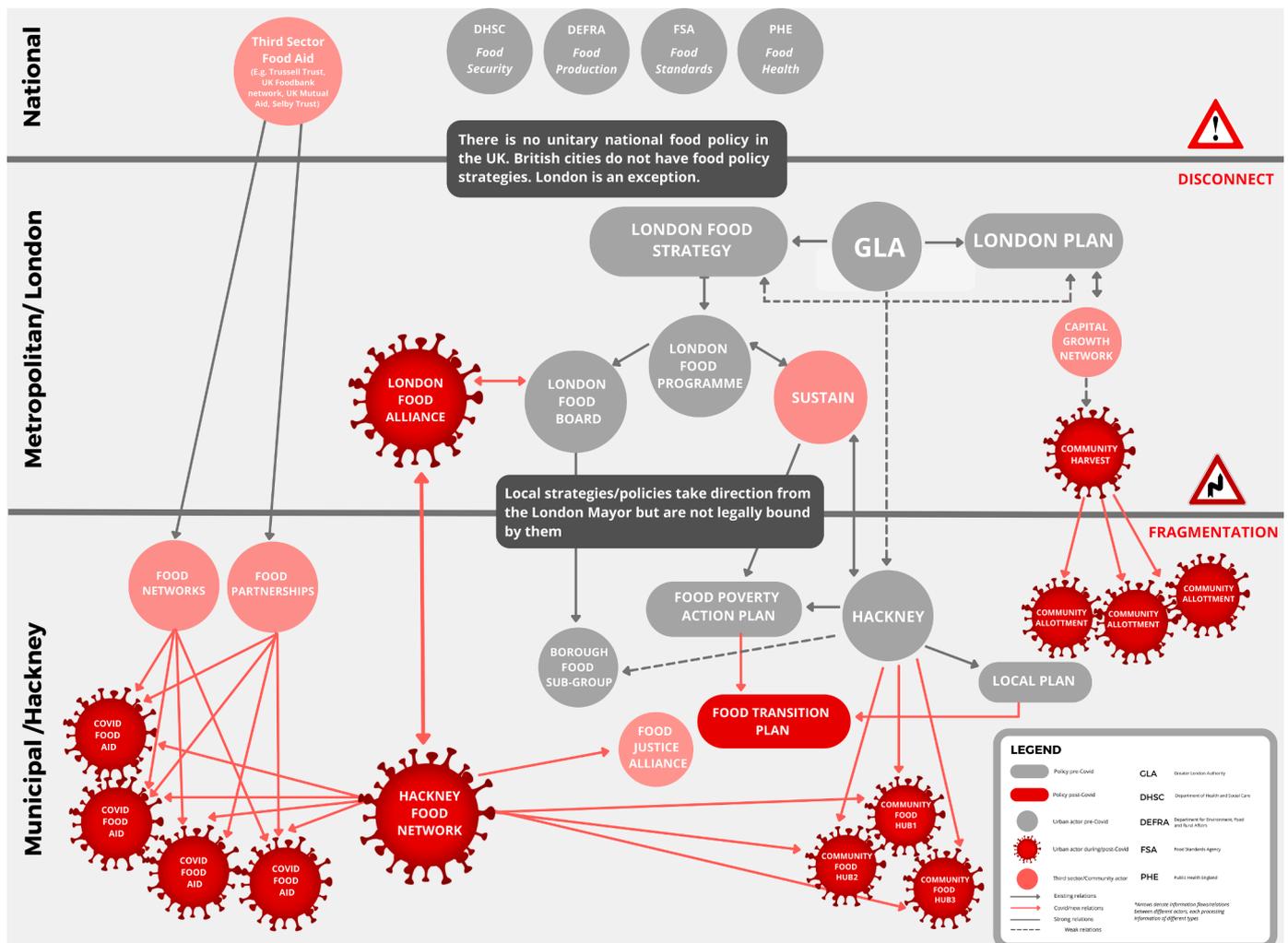


Fig. 1. Food governance in London: policy mechanisms and actors pre- and post- COVID19.

and priorities (Parsons et al., 2021), with little integration across the food, urban planning and food security sectors, at both metropolitan and municipal levels. However, responses to COVID-19 in relation to access to food in London have seen place-based and community-led initiatives, where volunteers, third sector organisations, community groups and local government have worked together to tackle food insecurity by using existing but also creating new and disruptive governance structures. This has created governance pressure from the bottom, which has seen during latter waves of COVID-19 a more pro-active local government working towards integration across sectors (i.e. planning for food storage, food growing and waste, social security, health, community services etc.) and administrative boundaries to avoid duplication of resources, make local action successful and develop more holistic solutions to access to food in case of emergencies. Two points to make here. First, the recent National Food Strategy (DEFRA, 2020, 2021) seeks to reform food governance from the top by addressing many of its weaknesses. However, it also acknowledges that two challenges remain: integration across policy sectors and participation at the ground level (Parsons & Barling, 2021). The participatory and integrated responses to access to food at the community level that we have witnessed during COVID-19 as well as their more recent growing influence at the municipal level can address these two challenges and start a food governance reform from the ground up. Second, this may mean a departure from traditional welfare reliance on people-based benefits and foodbank approaches, which address symptoms rather than ‘root causes’ of food insecurity (Lambie-Mumford, 2013) and a recognition that community-led food governance approaches contribute a better representation of the diversity and complexity of urban food needs hence, are in a better position to unpack the more structural food challenges of cities. Moreover, COVID-19 has seen all urban areas ‘underperforming’ in relation to access to food at the community level due to lockdowns and restrictions, and the return to place-based welfare response to complement existing people-based and spatially-blind models (Bentley & Pugalis, 2014) may be the way forward in governing similar events in the future.

*What is disruptive?* In response to COVID-19, London has utilised existing ties with its municipalities, third sector and community sector, made new partnerships, and worked collaboratively, often quite intensely and out of necessity, to deliver access to food for all across London including: welfare provision such as meals-on-wheels and free-school-meals services within the constraints of lockdown rules, distributed food aid and provided small grants for community growing projects and gardens (Sustain 2020). However, new actors have also emerged during this time, including the London Food Alliance and Community Harvest at the metropolitan level and the Hackney Food Network and Community Food Hubs at the municipal level; over time, they’ve all worked together towards emerging municipal policy such as the Food Transition Plans. These new actors and policies aim to coordinate food response across London from a community and place-based perspective. The Hackney Food Network is a case in point here: it has shifted the food security discourse from, traditionally, public delivery and private commissioning of food services, to the community level of place-centred and community-based service delivery. This community-led actor has challenged, and been disruptive, to the existing food governance framework of top-down food policymaking. In this sense, the paper contributes to recent academic debates which call for a reframing of urban food governance within the complexity of actors and networks in both the food system and urban system, while acknowledging the multi-level and multi-sector nature of their policymaking (Hayson, 2016; Lever et al., 2019; Moragues-Faus & Sonnino, 2019). Global crises such as COVID-19 can foster innovation in policymaking, while disrupting existing systems and traditional decision-making processes (LSE Cities, UCLG & Metropolis, 2020). However, the community-led nature of disruptive actors such as the Hackney Food Network, point to both the strengths and limitations of such actors. They can contribute positively to the democratisation of food policy and food governance systems,

engage in politics in an open and experimental way, efficiently reach out to marginalised residents and actively promote equality and power-sharing; but also reproduce existing inequalities in civic capacity, contribute to DIY governance that legitimates state withdrawal from social welfare commitments and, more importantly, only offer temporary solutions while failing to address deep underlying structural issues (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021).

*How disruption is governed?* Hackney paints a detailed account of what disruption in governing access to food has looked like during COVID-19 but also how that has been done: actors were incremental and not immediately visible (Maginn et al., 2018) and existing formal governance structures were overwhelmed at first (Williams and Shepherd (2021); this has made room for community-led response which has opened-up new governance spaces, driving policy change later-on (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021). The recent collaboration between the Hackney Food Network and the municipality is a proof of the growing influence of the former (Christensen, 2016) but also a driving rationale for the latter to stabilise the disrupted local food governance framework. The lesson here is that local government is more likely to innovate and accommodate disruptive organisations and initiative in the urban food system, by interacting with these new spaces of food governance to anchor food governance into place and community. This adds to the reflections above regarding the reforms suggested in the 2021 National Food Strategy: while the national tier of food governance may be slower to reform, it is the metropolitan and municipal levels where disruption can kick-start changes and so, reform can take root. Furthermore, London’s multi-level governance structure forms a fertile ground for policy experimentation, especially in the food sector given its current policy fragmentation and lack national steering, and for showcasing innovation. Throughout COVID-19, London’s food governance system has been localized via ad-hoc, experimental and innovative food response brought about by community-led multi-stakeholder cross-sector partnerships. This shows propensity towards disruptive thinking at the community level to speed up decision-making, and, ultimately, absorb risks. COVID-19 food responses have put on display ‘trial and error’ governance approaches which emerged in contrast to traditional processes which rely on testing policies in real contexts before implementation. COVID-19 has also changed how communities and foodscapes interact, and has exacerbated unequal access to healthy food in urban areas, with low income and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods and communities most affected (Haynes-Maslow, Hardison-Moody, & Carmen Byker, 2020). The case of Hackney has shown that a community and place approach to food security is able to fill the gaps in welfare provision and identify local synergies to strengthen and increase food security. By working in partnership with the municipality, third sector organisations and community groups, the Hackney Food Network has started as an informal initiative, promoting a disruptive, joined-up and cross-sector way of working to more sustainable and fair access to food at the local level (Weeks & Ainsbury, 2020) and linking frontline food response with other local priorities. By doing so, it has been able to create its own food governance space to support those hard to reach by existing local services; share food intelligence with local food stakeholders; and liaise across municipal departments (e.g., helpline, events, community halls, public health, parking, environmental services etc.). More importantly, it has put pressure on (and influenced) the municipality to reframe its local strategy on food poverty reduction, green recovery and local development (e.g. Hackney Food Transition Plan). Such type of community-based approach to food security determine policy solutions and governance structures which are more democratic and context specific, by connecting and empowering urban communities and actors who operate in place (Hamm & Bellows, 2003; Lever et al., 2019; McCullum et al., 2005; Pothukuchi, 2004).

The paper touches on the role of ‘space’ in governing access to food during COVID-19. The literature also notes how important is for urban planners to embrace disruption in order to anticipate and plan for changes in urban environments (Dixon et al. (2018). Planning for cities

that facilitates food growing and place-based food initiatives, not only can better address hunger and food insecurity, but also promote healthier environments and community relationships. Scholars are increasingly putting food at the centre of urban planning (Parham, 2020; Parham & Abelman, 2018), highlighting its synergies with other urban policy areas such as public health (e.g. obesity), transport (e.g. food logistics), environmental and social policies (e.g. food footprint, food security) and economic development (e.g. food desserts) (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 2000; Soma & Wakefield, 2011). Moreover, urban planning is intrinsically entangled with the food system and for millennia cities have evolved around and developed close to food distribution routes (Soma & Wakefield, 2011). However, this has changed with modern age, with urban agriculture only being encouraged occasionally, for example during the Second World War, and current globalisation and urbanisation trends that focus on producing commodity crops for international trade rather than feeding local communities (Soma & Wakefield, 2011). This exposes the urban food system to food security issues in the face of extraordinary events such as COVID-19, but also natural disasters or trade embargoes – for example, it is estimated that there are only about three days' worth of fresh food in major cities at any given time (Soma & Wakefield, 2011). In Hackney, the urban space acted as a geographic anchor that brought together a diversity of local actors and buildings (e.g. schools, community halls, churches, farms) which were repurposed as emergency locations for Community Food Hubs, and other food storage and collection uses. However, despite a common interest in growing food, Hackney's Local Plan and Food Poverty Action Plan do not speak to each other. Cities need to put food on their urban planning agenda so that all communities have fair access to food which is healthy, affordable and sustainable (Nasr & Komisar, 2012). Food security tends to be left out of urban planning's remit, as food choices are considered private matters (Cassidy & Patterson, 2008). However, urban planning plays an important role in improving food security via, for example, identifying unequal access to food and facilitating food supply in its policies and strategic plans (Nasr & Komisar, 2012). Integration between Local Plans and Food Poverty Action Plans at the borough level in London is one way of doing that, and Food Transition Plans a first step on that journey. This can be achieved by joining forces in supporting, for example, food growing and urban agriculture activities (Meenan & Hoover, 2012) and developing joint strategies concerned with where food is produced and how fair and sustainable its distribution and consumption are (Nasr & Komisar, 2012). COVID-19 showed us that changes to the urban form are inevitable (Florida, Rodríguez-Pose, & Storper, 2021) and so, a better understanding of the interdependencies between urban food and urban planning to support community access to food and sustainable food systems at the local level is needed.

## 6. Conclusion

The paper contributes to ongoing debates on urban food governance and community-based food security, and unpacks the disruptive nature (e.g. 'what' and 'how') of community-led and place-based governance of access to food during COVID-19 in London and Hackney. Two areas of further reflection are raised in the conclusion of this paper.

*Can this model be scaled-up and scaled-out?* Our interviewees were positive and noted how COVID-19 has changed urban food governance frameworks in most boroughs. Exporting the model to other contexts will need careful consideration of local conditions, understanding of existing governance frameworks and community landscapes. The relation between governance, collaboration and disruption deserves further attention – our current understanding is that collaboration is fragmented in the initial phases of disruption, however, it becomes dominant and overcomes disruption in later phases, as all involved actors collaborate to govern and so, to stabilise the disrupted system. The paper signposts the interdependency between food and urban planning and argues that the latter is instrumental in governing urban food, addressing access to food and, ultimately, mitigating for disruption in the food system from a

space and context-specific perspective (Slade, Baldwin, & Budget, 2016). Private sector involvement, of which we found little evidence here, is also important to scaling-up or scaling-out urban experiments tackling disruption.

*So what for theory?* This paper adds to wider contemporary debates about the many ways cities are being produced informally (Iveson et al., 2019; Parham, 2020) and disruptively (Maginn et al., 2018) and invites reflection on these processes through the lens of food governance and community food security in the city. One of cities' biggest challenge is to both adapt to disruptions when they happen but also to make sure that social equity and environmental sustainability in the changing city are not compromised. Furthermore, the disruptive aspects of community-led place-based food governance discussed in this paper are akin to what scholars have termed 'counter-democracy' and 'counter-mapping' where organisations from the bottom are critical of the neoliberal state system, challenge the policy status quo and push for policy change. The Hackney Food Network differs, however, in that it co-produced solutions to disruption and contributed directly to their application, despite being critical of existing urban food policy and governance frameworks. Such community-led mechanisms offers a broader lesson for contemporary democratic renewal and shed light on how communities themselves create more 'problem-centered' spaces for governance, on their own terms.

## Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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## Supplementary materials

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