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How Democratic Is Just Enough? Critical Reflections on the Transformative Potential of the Berlin Food Policy Council

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Abstract

In recent years, global social movements have increasingly challenged the corporate food regime, advocating for socio-ecological transformations in the agri-food system. This article questions whether food activists' discourse and actions may potentially compel a democratic, participatory, and just transformation of food systems, overcoming intersectional food inequalities and embedded power relations. Based on a three-year empirical case study (2021–2024) of the Berlin Food Policy Council, this article evaluates whether food policy councils can serve as venues for democratic participation, critical whiteness, and just food politics in urban settings, with implications for broader debates on urban social mobilization and transformation in Germany and beyond. Through participant observation, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews, this research reveals that Berlin's food policy council predominantly consists of white, German, middle-class, left-wing female activists, and is unrepresentative of the city's population. However, a growing internal awareness of socio-economic and cultural biases suggests evolving efforts towards greater participation and diverse perspectives. Further, the findings show a recent shift of agenda: from a narrow environmental focus towards a socio-ecological just transformation, overcoming (at least partially) existing blind spots concerning class, race, and migration history. How and when this occurs is shown through concrete examples of collective actions and changes in discourse. Moreover, the analysis suggests that the Berlin Food Policy Council demonstrates transformative potential through its multiscale approach, engaging in collective action at various levels—from local neighborhoods to regional and transnational initiatives.

Keywords

alternative food networks; food democracy; food justice; food policy council; Germany

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1. Introduction

Social movements have in recent years increasingly challenged the corporate food regime by advocating for a socio-ecological transformation of the agri-food system (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011; Motta, 2021a). Despite diverse food movements worldwide seeking alternatives and ecologically just, democratic food systems, many actors remain excluded from decision-making processes in food politics and practices (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Guthman, 2011; Slocum, 2007; Slocum et al., 2016). This struggle is addressed in claims for food democracy that refer to increasing participation, equity, and fairness (Hassanein, 2003). This perspective emphasizes the rights and responsibilities of all citizens to be active in shaping food policies and practices (Rosol & Béal, 2022; Sieveking, 2019). Its goal is a sustainable, fair, and accessible food system for all (Renting et al., 2012). Furthermore, food democracy is strongly interconnected with other food movements' claims such as food justice (Fladvad, 2018; Rosol, 2020; Rosol & Béal, 2022; Rosol et al., 2022).

One innovative social response to this struggle for food democracy is the emergence of food policy councils (FPCs). Originating in the US in the 1980s, FPCs have gained popularity in other parts of the world, such as the UK and Brazil (Doernberg et al., 2019). However, studies showed that, depending on their national and local food systems and governance, FPCs may vary significantly in organizational structure and aim (Grisa, 2021; Grisa & Zimmermann, 2015; Gupta et al., 2018; Harper et al., 2009; Schiff, 2007). Nevertheless, all FPCs are organized around food democracy and citizens' participation in food politics (Schiff et al., 2022). Bringing together academic findings and literature on FPCs in a 20-year scoping review, Schiff and colleagues describe some of the characteristics of most FPCs: collaborative, membership-driven organizations that convene stakeholders from a variety of sectors—public, private, community—with the objective of exploring integrated strategies for improving local and regional food systems (Schiff et al., 2022). Most FPCs operate at local/municipal levels. Depending on the context, food democracy is strongly interconnected with other concepts such as food justice, rights to food, community food security, and food sovereignty (Agarwal, 2014b; Candel, 2022; Fladvad, 2018; Rosol, 2020; Rosol & Béal, 2022; Rosol et al., 2022; Welsh & MacRae, 1998): "In the urban centers of the Global North, the concept of food justice or food democracy is increasingly being invoked instead of sovereignty" (Rosol & Strüver, 2018, p. 177).

There are currently already more than 45 FPCs in cities or regions in Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands (see Figure 1), collectively organized under the banner of "Food democracy now!" (Netzwerk der Ernährungsräte, 2024). In Germany, FPCs began to appear in 2016 in cities like Berlin and Cologne, as grassroots movements pushing for democratic and sustainable urban food politics and planning (Birnbaum & Lütke, 2023; Rosol, 2015, 2018, 2023). Since 2016, the movement has gained momentum, and FPCs have been founded in cities and regions across Germany (Renting et al., 2012; Sieveking, 2019; Sieveking & Schomerus, 2020). In 2023 alone, 28 FPCs were registered officially as associations or collaboratives (Birnbaum & Lütke, 2023, p. 390), and around 10 were on track towards professionalization. This shows how much mobilization and transformation in this field is being driven by civil society in Germany (Netzwerk der Ernährungsräte, 2024).

FPCs in Germany have adopted a broad range of topics to encompass sustainability, health, and economic factors (Doernberg et al., 2019; Kropp & Stinner, 2018; Rosol, 2015; Stierand, 2014). The present research focuses on the Berlin Food Policy Council (BFPC), examining this alternative food network (AFN) and its transformative potential to promote just food democracy. The goal is, first, to articulate those "food

Figure 1. Map with existing (house symbol) and emerging (tool symbol) FPCs in Germany. Source: Netzwerk der Ernährungsräte (2024).

inequalities" (Motta, 2021a) that activists are attempting to confront. Which power asymmetries—pertaining to structural forces, intersectionality, and multiscalarity—does the movement address, and by which repertoires of collective action? What types of knowledge and social innovations do alternative food practices and politics generate?

Following a short introduction, the article then moves to contextualize the present research within the current theoretical debates on food democracy, AFNs, and FPCs in critical (feminist) food studies and urban food geographies. Section 3 presents the methodological approach and methods. Section 4 presents the BFPC and traces its emergence and significant achievements from 2016 to 2024. Section 5 brings together the critical discussion of barriers to practicing food democracy in the BFPC, along with the transformative potential and limitations of some collective action for participatory, just food politics. The article then offers a concluding discussion of the findings and evaluates outstanding implications for social mobilization and the transformation of urban food systems.

2. Urban Food System Transformation and Food Democracy

Food movements demand and cultivate in practice a transformation of the food system; they find themselves in the midst of ongoing and contested processes of historical change regarding the extraction, distribution, and consumption of resources in a world with planetary and societal boundaries (Brand et al., 2021; Escobar, 2015; Geels, 2019; Pollan, 2010). The push for transformation stems from growing recognition and criticism of the dominant global food system (McMichael, 2005, 2009a, 2011), deemed unsustainable, unjust, and responsible for hunger, malnutrition, environmental degradation, and social inequalities (Bernstein, 2016; Campbell, 2009; Carolan, 2012; Friedmann, 2005; Friedmann & McMichael, 1989; McMichael, 2005, 2009a, 2009b; Motta, 2021b).

Many scholars have flagged the transformative potential of food movements (Fladvad, 2018, 2019; Holt-Giménez, 2011; Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011; Holt-Giménez & Wang, 2011; Motta, 2021a; Motta & Martín, 2021), AFNs (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; D. Goodman et al., 2012), and alternative food initiatives (Rosol, 2015, 2018, 2023). One argument holds that the transformative practices of such actors do not merely represent alternatives and structural change symbolically but also link concrete alternatives to the dominant capitalist and exploitative system of production, trade, and consumption (Kropp & Müller, 2018, p. 188).

2.1. AFNs and Urban Transformation

In this contested process of transformation, AFNs demand and initiate alternatives directly, thereby setting in train a transformation of the food system:

> The so-called "alternative food networks," which represent the crystallization points of a new movement, present themselves as locally embedded, participatory approaches to transformative economies. In this context, food practices and capabilities, food spaces and economies, as well as forms of production and consumption, are being redefined and reconfigured. (Kropp & Müller, 2018, p. 189)

AFN discourse and collective action bridge the urban and the rural; since cities have traditionally been marginal to agriculture and food politics, this constitutes a novel development. Deindustrialization, globalization, and the commodification of food historically contributed to the separation of urban populations and peri-urban or rural food production sites (Kropp & Müller, 2018): "Agriculture and food processing in the city and its surroundings have lost their relevance for urban development. Consequently, food and agriculture have become marginal issues in urban planning" (Doernberg et al., 2019, p. 1). Housing, infrastructure, and energy are likewise dominant in urban planning, whereas food has been peripheral and rarely understood as relevant for multiple overlapping aspects of life in a "just city" (Fainstein, 2014).

Cities have never been passive "consumers of food" but always sites of contestation, where cultural meaning has been imposed on "suppliers" (Kropp & Müller, 2018, p. 188). Urbanites engaged in food initiatives become political subjects and typically welcome their capacity as citizens to actively shape food politics; they reject the limited role of a passive consumer: "Cities are emerging as sites of education about agri-food systems—and the need to change them—of re-politicization and protest, and of envisioning and enacting alternatives" (Rosol, 2023, p. 77). A milestone in the gathering mobilization for alternative urban food politics was the October 2015 Milan Urban Food Policy Pact. More than 100 cities signed this international protocol aimed at tackling food-related issues at the urban level at the Expo Milan (Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, 2015). In collaboration with other international organizations and coalitions such as FAO (2024) or the C40 (2024) network, the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact became a touchstone for those cities seeking resilient, sustainable, and just food systems.

According to Motta (2021a, 2021b), despite the potential for transformation, however, several limitations persist when it comes to AFNs and alternative food initiatives. Scholars have criticized those practices and strategies emphasizing market-oriented solutions, and which are overly focused on individual consumers, thereby limiting structural change and preserving neoliberal and capitalist social–property relations (Alkon,

2014; Allen, 2008; D. Goodman et al., 2012; Harris, 2009; Mares & Alkon, 2011). Another limitation has been a romanticization of the local (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; DuPuis et al., 2006; Fonte, 2013; Kilmer, 2012): many "label AFN localism 'unreflexive' and 'defensive'...reproducing neoliberal forms and subjectivities" (Harris, 2009, p. 60). Consequently, several studies of the spatiality of AFNs adopt a multi-scalar framework and a relational perspective (de Carvalho et al., 2022; M. K. Goodman, 2016; Jarosz, 2000; Sarmiento, 2017; Winter, 2005) combining spatial categories (local, regional, national, global), communication spheres (digital, analog), urban–rural characteristics, and other categories of spatiality and the social: street, neighborhood, kitchen, and the like. In the German AFN debate, questions of re-localization, urban-rural bridges, and the potential for scaling up regional initiatives are now quite prominent (Bechmann, 2021; Roep & Wiskerke, 2012; Rosol, 2020; Vicente-Vicente et al., 2023; Zentgraf & Motta, 2024). Third, critical approaches call attention to the racial, class, and gender blindness of AFNs (Allen, 2010; Allen & Sachs, 2007, 2012; Guthman, 2008, 2011) and demand the incorporation of food justice more effectively in their agendas for a socio-ecological transformation. Research about AFNs in Germany has now sought to overcome such limitations, but when compared to research on North America (DuPuis et al., 2006; Guthman, 2008; Slocum, 2007) and South America (Conway & Paulos, 2020; Hoinle, 2020; Teixeira & Motta, 2022), it is still rudimentary.

2.2. FPCs and Their Transformative Potential and Limitations

FPCs are often described as AFNs (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Harper et al., 2009; Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011), and, more recently, as alternative food initiatives (Rosol, 2018; Rosol & Strüver, 2018) or alternative food organizations (Schiller-Merkens & Machin, 2023), given their range of organizational structure. In the US, Canada, and Brazil—the first countries with FPCs—both structures and agendas differ significantly (Schiff et al., 2022): "The food councils of the first hour often emerged from informal coalitions in the areas of hunger reduction, sustainable agriculture, and community development" (Sieveking & Schomerus, 2020, p. 681). Research showed that FPCs adapt their strategies and actions to their local contexts and food systems (Gupta et al., 2018; Harper et al., 2009; Schiff, 2007). Consequently, the experiences with national, state, and local governance are quite diverse (Barbosa & Coca, 2022; Bassarab et al., 2019; Grisa, 2021; Grisa & Zimmermann, 2015; Recine, 2023; Scherb et al., 2012). In the 1990s and 2000s, the idea of food democracy and diverse actions of urban food policies through collaboration and strategic exchange among different stakeholders spread worldwide. FPC has become a general term for numerous initiatives united in their aim of improving food politics and practices through public policy (Schiff, 2007):

> In general, they promote the idea that food system transformation cannot occur without support from institutional politics, which is why they try to achieve "hard law" regulatory changes in the form of sustainable food policies....With their multi-political approach to sustainability transformation—combining prefigurative, institutional and occasional involvement in contentious politics—FPCs can play a crucial role in the fundamental transformation of the food system. (Schiller-Merkens & Machin, 2023, p. 315)

Studies on FPCs may be categorized by lines of debate. Some see FPCs as an attempt to practice food democracy (Allen, 2010; Harper et al., 2009; Hassanein, 2003), others as initiatives in prefigurative politics (Schiller-Merkens & Machin, 2023) and food-related empowerment (Bornemann & Weiland, 2019; Sieveking, 2019); still others see FPCs as transformative actors for food justice (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Carlson &

Chappell, 2015). As with the aforementioned critique of the transformative potential of AFNs, some scholars problematize FPCs as too focused on a single issue (Harper et al., 2009; Rosol, 2023), lacking in diversity (Allen, 2010; D. Goodman et al., 2012), and restricted by location (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005). The present study follows Slocum (2007) and the feminist and decolonial food scholarship by adopting an intersectional analysis of the "progressive potential in the white spaces of alternative food (markets, conferences, 'the local' discourse) and in the interaction of bodies that constitute those spaces" (p. 9). Because most of those engaged in German FPCs are white, the movement exemplifies a "spatiality of whiteness in community food" (Slocum, 2007, p. 7) with its attendant exclusions and inequalities. Nevertheless, one may also see the "progressive potential and the fuzziness of race, visible in alternative food practices" as "a site of possibility" (Slocum, 2007, p. 7).

The number of studies on FPCs in Germany continues to grow. In 2023, Birnbaum and Lütke (2023) presented a first overview of the emerging FPCs in their work on food and governmentality in the green city. Sieveking and Schomerus (2020) have explored FPCs as instruments of food transition in Germany and Doernberg et al. (2019) have analyzed FPCs as key players in the food policies of Germany's urban regions. Furthermore, several recent case studies have examined specific FPCs. These cover food democracy in Oldenburg (Sieveking, 2019); transformative economies in Berlin and Cologne (Rosol, 2015, 2018, 2023; Rosol & Strüver, 2018); food system sustainability in the Upper-Rhine Region (Michel et al., 2022); FPC history in Cologne (Thurn, 2020); and the general potential of urban community initiatives in Germany for addressing social and environmental justice (Rosol, 2023).

2.3. Food Democracy: From Participation to Co-Determination

Food movements have developed concepts like food democracy, food sovereignty, and food justice (Fladvad, 2018; Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011; Motta & Martín, 2021; Rombach & Bitsch, 2015) that retain a local specificity even as they traverse international networks. Food-related discourses aid in the comprehension of local struggles by illuminating their transformative potential, the scales at which they can operate, and their ability to cross spatial and social boundaries (Motta, 2021a). Food democracy as a concept itself invokes increased participation, equity, and fairness across the food system. First introduced by Lang (1998, 2007), who posed the question of food policy in the 21st century, it can be "both radical and reasonable" (Lang, 1999):

> In social terms, food democracy is a set of demands from below. Food democracy, as a force in food policy, is significant because for two centuries, since industrialization and the modern globalization experiment unfolded, there has been counterpressure to provide the means to eat adequately, affordably, safely, humanely, and in ways one considers civil and culturally appropriated. (Lang, 1999, p. 218)

Many scholars took the concept further, emphasizing the responsibilities of the citizenry to engage actively in shaping food policies (Berglund et al., 2021; Hassanein, 2008). Food democracy is strongly linked to knowledge exchange and the co-production of food (Hassanein, 2008; Kropp, 2018). Its transformative power derives from its direct challenge to capital; it is a "constructive method for political practice because participation is a key feature of democracy" (Hassanein, 2003, p. 78). In opposing the commodification of food, it transforms passive consumers into active, informed citizens (Welsh & MacRae, 1998):

> At the core of food democracy is the idea that people can and should be actively participating in shaping the food system….In other words, food democracy is about citizens having the power to determine agro-food policies and practices locally, regionally, nationally, and globally. (Hassanein, 2003, p. 78)

This approach is central to FPCs. FPCs promise to unite diverse groups and individuals, including farmers, consumers, activists, and policymakers, under a common vision of an ecologically sound, just, and democratic food system. Compared to other AFNs, their focus is on transformation through political participation and the prefiguration of "alternative practices and values around food that are not yet realized at a broader scale" (Schiller-Merkens & Machin, 2023, p. 315). The two ideas of participation and co-determination of food politics (influencing policies and consequent practices) are at the core of academic literature on food democracy. A combination of Hassanein's approach with more recent work on sustainability (Bornemann, 2022; Bornemann & Weiland, 2019), scale and justice (Davies et al., 2019; Pungas, 2023; Sieveking, 2019), and critical analysis of FPCs as AFNs is the analytical basis of this study.

3. Methodology

This study's methodological approach follows critical discourse analysis (CDA) as defined by Van Dijk (2015, p. 466):

> Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take an explicit position and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately challenge social inequality. This is also why CDA may be characterized as a social movement of politically committed discourse analysts.

CDA enables both the identification of "enacted" food inequalities and an understanding of their reproduction and legitimation. It also situates activist resistance to inequality in its social and political context: "Relations of power and dominance (cf. Foucault, Bourdieu, and Gramsci), however, can be discursively resisted as well as counter-resisted in a dynamic of struggle over securing and challenging the interest in stake" (Lazar, 2005, p. 10). Such an approach identifies limitations as well as potentials of the FPC as a platform for ecological, democratic, and just transformations. Importantly, there is not one CDA method; CDA is strengthened by the broad range of approaches it incorporates. Key is the examination of discourse as dialectically related to social processes, and its role in maintaining and reproducing social and institutional structures and power imbalances. CDA also exposes these inequalities and therefore challenges their hegemony so as to foster social change (Fairclough, 2013).

3.1. Methods and Data Collection

Three types of data were combined in their collection: (a) ethnographic field notes; (b) documents and social media posts; and (c) semi-structured interviews. First, many participant observations were undertaken during events, general assemblies, project meetings, and protest actions in which the FPC took part. This engaged (Frampton et al., 2006; Rasch & Van Drunen, 2017) and multi-sited (Marcus, 1995, 1999) ethnographic fieldwork took place over a period of four years and aided in tracing the internal structures and

discourses of FPC activists. Further, the multi-sited ethnographic work facilitated an understanding of the multiscalarity of the BFPC; it is important to recognize that this study is localized, with specific spatial characteristics. The goal is not to generalize, but rather to focus on understanding the unique aspects of this case in an examination of how they may complement other studies of AFNs and FPCs. Observations and experiences from the ethnographical work were documented in 10 handwritten field diaries, several digital and hand-drawn mind maps, and various sketches—a useful source, lending support to findings from the remaining two data collection methods.

Second, press releases, position papers, and other published materials, including two books, were collected, as were one food strategy catalog and one intercultural recipe book published online by the BFPC between 2018 and 2024; social media posts on Instagram from the years 2021 to 2023 were also included.

Third, a total of 15 semi-structured interviews with activists from the BFPC were conducted. All speakers and hired staff were interviewed, along with those most active in its various working groups and projects. The goal was to not only record the core group perspective but also those of the most engaged activists during the period of fieldwork. A longer-term view was provided by one activist from the foundation period. Interviews were transcribed with the programs Trint and NoScribe.

3.2. Data Organization and Coding

Following data collection, an inductive coding of the material was conducted in two stages based on Saldana's *Coding Manual* (Saldana, 2015). Thematic and explorative coding was applied to identify patterns and themes related to the research question. It was however open enough to allow for the discovery of new and unexpected tendencies. Upon the completion of a first set of descriptive thematic codes, clustering was used to distinguish broader patterns as called for by qualitative content analysis methodology (Mayring & Fenzl, 2019). In the second stage, these thematic clusters were once again coded to achieve a set of analytical codes—and to consolidate empirical observations, the analytical framework, and the methodological approach of CDA. This final step aimed to identify common themes and practices in the written and verbal discourse of food activists, and to spotlight those hierarchies and inequalities "enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted" (Van Dijk, 2015, p. 466) as well as perceptions and debates on food democracy and justice within the BFPC.

4. The BFPC

The Ernährungsrat Berlin—the German name of the BFPC—was founded on April 22, 2016, at the Center for Art and Urbanistics in Berlin (ZK/U) by citizens of Berlin and Brandenburg. Figure 2 depicts a turning point for urban food politics and strategic urban planning in the German capital around 2015, when Berlin, with other cities, signed the Milan Pact. It was hardly a coincidence that a year on, the BFPC emerged from a local working group created in 2014 (Interview_21, 2024). An open movement lacking formal membership, it welcomes all who seek to change food and agriculture politics in the Berlin region. Yet some structure was found to be necessary; a group of spokespersons developed a non-profit association in accordance with a resolution passed by the general assembly in 2018 to apply for and manage funds. The Ernährungsrat Berlin e.V. has been registered as an NGO since June 2018 and maintains an office in the Berlin Global Village, located in the neighborhood of Neukölln (BFPC, 2018).

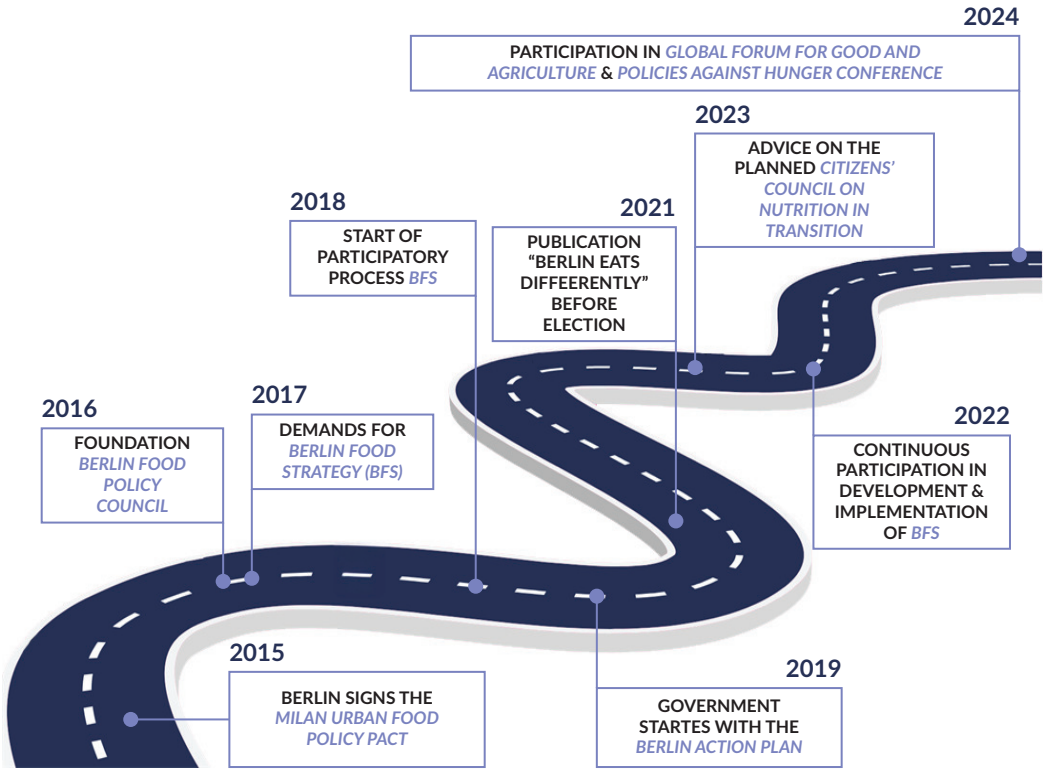

Figure 2. Different milestones of the BFPC in food politics on the local and federal levels.

The BFPC lays out its goals for food system transformation on its website as follows:

> The Berlin Food Policy Council is the platform for all local and regional actors who are active in this transformation. From this platform the participating consumers, farming producers, urban gardeners, food rescuers, representatives of the local gastronomy and food economics, scientists, representatives of associations, clubs, and educational institutions and others develop their common goals and strategies and turn them into political activities and actions. (BFPC, 2023)

In its first year, the BFPC produced a catalog comprised of nine demands for a Berlin Food Strategy, conveyed to the city administration in 2017 (Figure 3a). Many of its strategic aims focused on sustainability and transition toward a regional and ecologically sound food system, such as community gardens. Others were more oriented toward social themes, such as public canteens and the active political participation of Berlin citizenry through a so-called food campus. Lastly, the BFPC also sought to hold politicians and officials accountable by demanding improved coordination among the senate, the district administration, and citizens.

In 2018, the city government—a coalition of the Social Democrats, The Left, and the Greens—proposed a participatory strategy, undertaken with stakeholders in politics, business, and across civil society (including the BFPC). It initially yielded the Berlin Action Plan of 2019, which included eight fields of action for the urban food system in Berlin. The Action Plan marked the BFPC's first significant achievement, as most of its claims were incorporated: fostering public canteens, revaluing regional food chains, creating diverse neighborhood food consumption structures, reducing food waste and packaging, greater transparency for consumers, more food education programs, and improved collaboration with the municipal administration. In 2020, the BFPC

Figure 3. Different forms of knowledge production undertaken by the BFPC: (a) a catalog of demands for the Berlin Food Strategy sent to local governments in 2017; (b) the Action Conference for the Berlin Action Plan, initiated in 2018; and (c) the book *Berlin Eats Different*, publicizing ideas and already existing transformative practices and projects underway in Berlin and Brandenburg.

organized an Action Conference with several "idea kitchens" whose purpose was the implementation of the Action Plan (Figure 3b). In synthesizing the knowledge and experience of more than 300 people, it became an incubator for important ideas and urban food planning (BFPC, 2020). One of the indirect outcomes was the publication of the book *Berlin Eats Different* (Figure 3c), which for the first time combined expert insight and analysis of the problems with Berlin's prevailing food system. It also contains an "inventory" of various extant Berlin-based initiatives, projects, and strategies (BFPC, 2021). The book was published before the city election in 2021 and handed to politicians from different parties to emphasize the need for continuous work on urban food politics and cross-sectoral implementation of the Action Plan.

In 2021, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, increasing consequences of climate change for food production, and the rising cost of food, food insecurity became more prominent in German public discourse. Increasing media attention was trained on those in marginalized and precarious situations who were affected by multiple crises (health, security, climate, and economy). Food insecurity—hitherto associated with the unemployed, underemployed, and those receiving social aid—became part of political debate on social participation, health, and local resilience (Birner et al., 2023). In 2022, a scarcity of healthy food continued to plague a growing share of the population. Due to higher prices, many families found themselves unable to afford good food and opted for cheap and high-calorie alternatives. The homeless lost access to soup kitchens and other social initiatives due to social distancing and closed facilities, and the elderly were abandoned—left isolated in their rooms or retirement homes, with no ability to share a meal with others. Under such conditions, the social component of food was necessarily emphasized in the concept of food poverty (Biesalski, 2021; Monetti, 2024). There are two registers of food poverty: the material deprivation of nutrients and a healthy diet, and the lack of social and cultural participation through food (Pfeiffer, 2014). The BFPC played an active role in setting this new agenda and made it visible in agri-food politics in Berlin and Germany-wide. In 2023, the BFPC joined the EU project FoodCLIC with the goal of monitoring food poverty and environment—"the physical, economical, political, and sociocultural context in which each consumer engages with the food system" (Franco et al., 2016, p. 22)—in the neighborhoods of Rollberg (Neukölln) and Falkenhagener Weg (Spandau), so as to measure food poverty in urban spheres (BFPC, 2022). The aim was to engage those experiencing food poverty—not to speak about them but with them, to understand their struggles, and to develop alternative food strategies collaboratively,

instead of reproducing stereotypes and prejudices: "When one talks about poor people and nutrition, unfortunately, it's that they can't do something, or that they are buying the wrong food, or that you have to teach them something" (Interview_3, 2023).

In 2024, the BFPC participated in the Global Forum for Food and Agriculture, in the Conference Policies Against Hunger, and as advisor to the citizens' council Nutrition in Transition initiated by the German government, which aimed to expand citizen participation in the Food Strategy nationally. Through these national and international engagements, the BFPC sought to prioritize food injustice and poverty within German politics, and to monitor policy development in the citizens' council. At two international events, the BFPC introduced a speaker from the Poverty Network Germany to report on the daily experience of food poverty. Yet such reports did not remain merely personal; they rather emphasized structural problems and held the state responsible for combating hunger in Germany. This approach symbolizes a shift in the dominant discourse in agri-food politics in Germany: Hunger had usually been associated with development aid in the so-called Global South and peripheries. Despite the recognition by the Minister for Food and Agriculture and the incorporation into the National Food Strategy in 2024, little has been achieved concretely until now (Rücker, 2024). The growing recognition of "hidden hunger" (Biesalski, 2020) and food insecurity in Germany under the concept of "food poverty" (Pfeiffer, 2014) can be seen as another indication that the BFPC is among the most capable advocates in its field. In the words of one of the activists: "We are currently experiencing a shift. Ten years ago, the question of the social impact of the agri-food system hardly played a role. New questions are coming into focus…the urgency of a societal food transformation" (Interview_3, 2023).

5. Transformative Potential and Challenges of the BFPC

Figure 4 shows the dominant aspects of food inequalities (Motta, 2021a) addressed by the BFPC activist discourse and collective action. The frequency of the mention of each type of inequality is illustrated by its corresponding typeface size and the surrounding bubble. Dots arranged in circular lines connect these categories and highlight the linkages between structural forces. The dots size and color are kept irregular to signify that interconnections are not always associated in analyzed data; they show that new dimensions of inequalities may arise. A spiral structure of the dotted lines illustrates the fact that the coded inequalities are changing in a constantly moving field, and that the present analysis therefore only constitutes a snapshot.

Unsurprisingly, since the emergence of the platform, political, economic, and environmental inequalities have been most frequently addressed. As one activist from the BFPC stated: "Basically, food democracy is about participation in the food system and opportunities for co-determination in food politics that do not currently exist in this form" (Interview_4, 2022). Activists clearly see that the road to transformation is political. Regarding economic transformation, there is no dominant anti-capitalist discourse in the analyzed material, as distinct from the literature on food democracy (Hassanein, 2003). Two notable points should be highlighted: First, epistemological inequalities are frequently mentioned along with the importance of knowledge co-production, as many of the BFPC's collaborations and projects include educational components. Second, the growing awareness of the city's cultural and social food inequalities can be found in recent documents and interviews and will be illustrated in what follows.

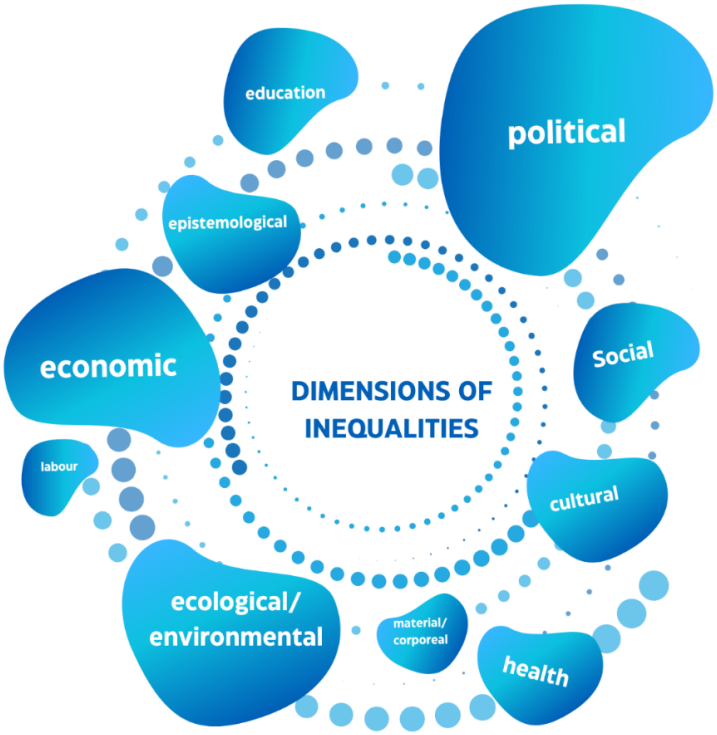

Figure 4. Dimensions of food inequalities coded in the data. Source: Author's own elaboration based on Motta (2021a).

5.1. Dimensions of Inequalities: Knowledge Co-Production and Cultural Differences

Knowledge production is often mentioned as one main component of the BFPC's actions and strategies (it is also described as a central characteristic of food democracy by Hassanein, 2008). Yet a lack of knowledge regarding those with migration backgrounds or those from the working class as related to the transformation of the food system seriously limits the participatory and just transformation approach: "What about all these topics regarding food in which everyone is an expert? Where it's not about educating, but the other way around, understanding ourselves all as teachers of food practices" (Interview_3, 2023). Despite the growing recognition of diverse food knowledge and practices, there is still a lack of representation of this diversity in Berlin's alternative food scene and in the FPC itself.

In response to such homogeneity, the BFPC has attempted to collaborate with initiatives rooted in communities such as Yesil Chember, Über den Tellerrand, and KATE. Many of these initiatives know of one another, but strategic collaboration remains rare. A kind of segregation prevails among heterogeneous groups engaged in different neighborhoods and communities. Nevertheless, with the Food Strategy in Berlin, there is now a growing awareness of unrealized potential. Such initiatives attempt to connect with one another more actively to exchange knowledge and practices; the intercultural food festival is one such venue for this process. Politics reacts to its lacunae by incorporating diverse perspectives drawn from the Berlin citizenry in a novel format termed the Interkulturelles Netzwerktreffen (intercultural network meeting), begun in 2023 (Figure 5b). Observers are prepared to study any future concrete actions and policy outcomes produced by these network meetings.

Figure 5. Intercultural food initiatives, incorporating knowledge and practices from different Berlin food cultures (reproduction from Instagram): (a) intercultural food festival; (b) intercultural network meeting of Berlin Food Strategy; and (c) meeting organized by the BFPC engaging with Arabic communities.

Significant challenges persist, most notably regarding engagement with non-German speakers. Until recently, communication, events, and actions had been conducted largely in written German: "I was there, many people speak German. I participated for two, three weeks and then I felt a bit alone…can we perhaps offer things in a different language?" (Interview_8, 2022). Beyond language, culture also influences how FPC activists interact with those with migration or refugee backgrounds. Many interviewees referred to different food cultures and habits in their respective communities and the difficulty faced when connecting with the Food Strategy or German activist discourse. Some felt judged and harbored negative associations with sustainability and food discourses: "Such a food education discourse may also attack and devalue" (Interview_3, 2023). Such responses indicate that much more translation work is needed; not only in terms of multi-lingual information, events, and documents, but through broader efforts to translate concepts between cultures when it comes to climate, vegetarianism, and recycling.

The recent debate over halal meat in school canteens illustrates well some of the intercultural tensions confronting FPCs. Some German food activists prioritize animal welfare and oppose halal methods for slaughtering livestock. Many within the Turkish and Arabic communities do not eat pork on religious grounds and prefer serving halal meat to their children. A compromise is to be found in vegetarianism: "I think that's particularly important in the migrant community, including this topic of halal….People wanted chicken, but only halal, I said no. That clashed. We did argue, but in the end [we said]: let's agree on vegetarian" (Interview_4, 2022). A vegetarian diet in such a case represents a bridge between cultural positions regarding meat consumption and the environment.

5.2. Intersections of Inequalities: Class Awareness, Critical Whiteness, and Diversity

As the above examples indicate, intersectional food inequalities (Motta, 2021a) are addressed through BFPC activist discourse and action. Figure 6 maps the frequency of each mentioned inequality, as represented by the scale of the typeface and the size of the surrounding bubble. Circular dotted lines connecting various categories signify interconnections. The straight lines in the center show the densest intersections found in the analyzed data; dots and bubbles lacking categories indicate that there may be blind spots, as not all activists from the BFPC were interviewed, such as members of the youth BFPC. Furthermore, just as in Figure 4, the

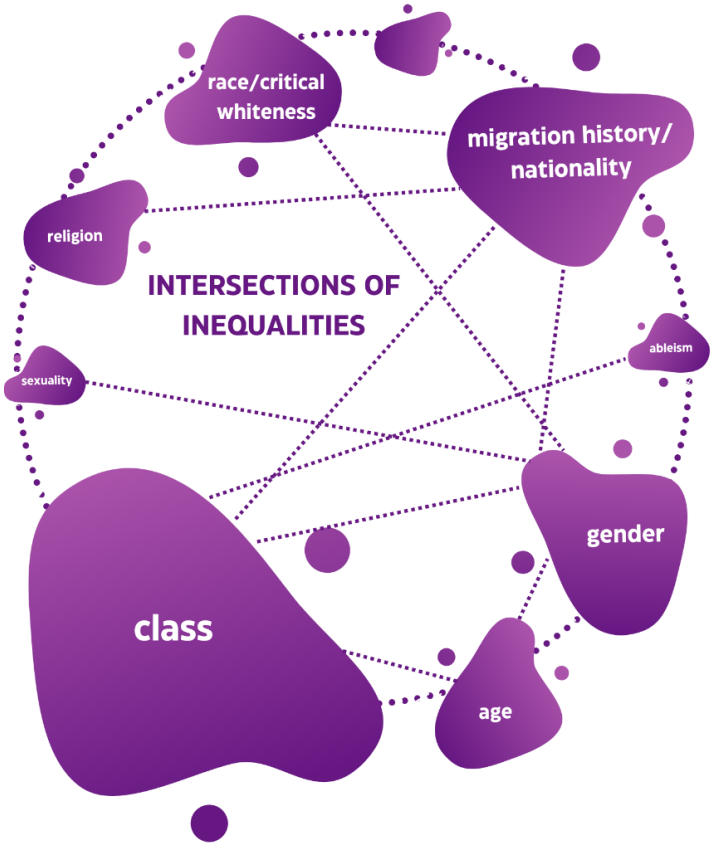

Figure 6. Intersections of food inequalities as coded in the data. Source: Author's own elaboration based on Motta (2021a).

dotted lines emphasize that the coded inequalities change in this constantly moving field and that the present analysis can therefore only represent a snapshot.

Injustices related to class differences are clearly the most frequently mentioned in the data (Figure 6). Several other aspects such as the dominant discourse on inequalities related to migration history and nationality, as well as the growing awareness of critical whiteness, call attention to and match developments when observing the participation, projects, and agenda-setting of the BFPC since 2020: "Those in the active core are actually all academics, white, female, from the eco-left. It's not diverse. But there are serious attempts to change that" (Interview_2, 2023).

The composition of the BFPC has recently changed, yielding a more heterogeneous group and agenda. Two people with migration and refugee backgrounds were elected as spokespersons. They started to reorient the BFPC's work, bringing social and cultural aspects of food democracy and justice to the fore through the project Everyone at the Table, which addressed a scarcity of healthy food in communities of migrants and refugees. Most significant was the lack of proper ingredients such as raw milk needed to produce traditional cheeses. The project produced a recipe book of healthy, intercultural dishes featuring regional foods, developed at cooking events for migrant communities; national cuisines and customs were given special prominence. The project exemplifies a co-production of alternative food practices and the great potential of food democracy.

Figure 6 attempts to indicate the axes of intersectional inequalities that remain invisible or deprioritized in the contemporary vision of a just food democracy. Many activists underscore the importance or interconnectedness of democracy and justice. When asked about gender inequalities, for example, FPC activists concede that most activists are women and deduce that therefore feminist standpoints should be automatically present. Some understand gender inequality to be a problem mainly for other world regions:

> [Gender inequality] hasn't been an issue so far. It wasn't a set topic, but I'm aware of it. Yes, of course, I am aware that women mainly feed families, especially in countries of the Global South. Not so much here, but there….And that here [in Germany] in the restaurants…that's almost all male chefs. Very few women. (Interview_3, 2023)

Regarding gender inequalities in food labor, the activist describes the disparities between predominantly male chefs in restaurants and women's responsibility in feeding the family—home cooking remains invisible care work done mostly by women. There is clearly an understanding of gender as an intersectional category of difference. Yet a more strategic approach toward gender inequality remains a blind spot in the BFPC's just food democracy activism. This is quite surprising, since gender equality is often addressed in the literature as a major problem in food system transformation and food justice (Agarwal, 2014a; Desmarais, 2003; Lewis, 2015; Motta, 2021b; Patel, 2012).

In the following two sections, two collective actions will be recounted. Both emerged as a response to the critique of homogeneity and lack of participation of a diverse citizenship in the BFPC. In 2023, the Working Group on Diversity and Participation initiated a new action called Food Justice Get-Togethers, intended to confront certain problems with the prevailing strategies of rectifying food injustices. The second action was the Mobile Food Campus on Tour, which aimed to broaden the participation of citizens from different communities in Berlin. These actions are attempts to democratize food practices and to foster co-determination of food politics by incorporating a wider range of political subjects. They also, however, indicate the limitations of scaling up highly localized alternative practices toward prefigurative political strategies and food policies.

5.2.1. Food Justice Get-Togethers

The idea for the collective action consisted of a quarterly gathering to discuss different problems and ideas for how to tackle food injustices in Berlin. Invitations and communication were circulated in English in order to include non-German speakers and to reach interested people in different communities. Those attending the first two meetings included: a chef from a Syrian school canteen, a Polish leader of a community garden, a Syrian farmer, an Afghan pastry chef, an Afghan sociology student, an American food justice activist, a Brazilian food scientist, and several German food activists and scientists—all of whom shared the difficulties they faced, their achievements and demands for transforming their neighborhood food systems, and those of their communities and families. Many articulated the barriers to further participation in local food politics and identified difficulty with the German language as central. After initial introductions and the formulation of an agenda and aims, the group then tried to reach those from the Arabic and Turkish communities located in the neighborhood of the BFPC headquarters. Here, the intent was to initiate the first actions embedded in the immediate surroundings in order to collaborate with local residents. Some materials were therefore translated not only into English and German but also into Arabic and Turkish (see Figure 7). The meeting topics of the seven Food Justice Get-Togethers were the following:

- Brainstorming on food justice in Berlin;
- International perspective on food justice—experiences from Syria and Afghanistan;
- Assessing food poverty and food environments in Berlin and its different neighborhoods;
- Diverse food cultures in Berlin and Brandenburg, e.g. Syrian cheese producers;
- Inclusive food transition and the right to food in Berlin;
- Inclusive food transition and food poverty in Neukölln and Spandau;
- Equal opportunities start with food in Moabit.

The meeting topics reflect the plurality of food justice issues in relation to other critical concepts and demands coined by food movements: food poverty, food environments, food cultures, and the right to food. Notably, the concept of food sovereignty or community food security as a prominent banner of radical food movements and AFNs is not represented. Themes derive directly from the participants' sharing and co-producing knowledge based on the diverse experiences of Berlin life. A Syrian cheesemaker in Brandenburg recounted the challenges of producing traditional Syrian products for communities in Berlin. Neighborhood and local food politics were the main spheres of transformation, but the family and the community were also often mentioned during the gatherings, showcasing the intersection of multiscalarity (local, regional, neighborhood) and cultural-identitarian spheres (community, family). This action is an important first step toward expanding citizen participation in food politics. However, it remains to be seen how concrete proposals or changes in urban food policies in Berlin will emerge from this practice.

Figure 7. Invitation to a quarterly Food Justice Get-Together (reproduction from the Instagram of the BFPC).

5.2.2. Mobile Food Campus on Tour

The idea of a food campus—a physical site of exchange, a hub of thought, production, and exploration of the future and transformation of Berlin's food system—had already been contemplated as early as 2018. Originally planned to be located at Berlin's old central airport, which is now the park Tempelhofer Feld, the proposal encountered many obstacles before it could be realized. Then, in 2023, with funding from the Berlin Senate

as part of the Berlin Food Strategy, a group founded the Mobile Food Campus on Tour, organized around a basic setup: a bike trailer with a kitchen, foldable table, and material for cooking and eating, to be used as a venue for developing plans for transforming the citywide food infrastructure (see Figure 8). Down to the present, the Mobile Food Campus has been used in different neighborhood festivals and events to connect people in the city, generate networks, and map specific needs and demands. The food campus fosters knowledge co-production and exchange regarding alternative food practices from the kitchen to the city government, from the fields to the markets, in both city and countryside.

Figure 8. Mobile Food Campus on Tour at various Berlin neighborhood festivals (reproduction from the Instagram of the BFPC).

One aim of the Mobile Food Campus is to learn about social innovations that are already laying the groundwork for alternatives to the dominant system:

> Knowledge also creates justice. Knowledge is such a power and somehow also a way of sharing and of opportunities for action, which can also be political engagement. We're talking a lot about that at the moment: where do we want to take our tours [with the Mobile Food Campus]. (Interview_5, 2023)

Such action is not limited to the neighborhood scale; the Mobile Food Campus holds sustainable and just food events focusing on production, consumption, urban–rural connections, regional systems, and knowledge and innovation in various national settings. Knowledge exchange and co-production with citizens of this type is part of the process of creating a revised BFPC catalog, a list of policy demands that will include claims and best practices from participatory interactions with people across Berlin's neighborhoods, to be sent to the Berlin Senate. It remains to be seen how politicians will adapt or expand the current Food Strategy in Berlin.

5.3. Multiscalarity: Places of Collective Action and Reflexive Localism

The multiple scales of food system transformation and consequent challenges are yet another frame for activist discourse. Scale imposes itself at the practical level of everyday life in Berlin, where long distances and variations in districts can pose a challenge, and where the entanglements of the local and the global are also felt. A "reflexive localism" (D. Goodman et al., 2012) criticizes the binary of the global and the local. It harnesses the power of global food regimes and confronts capitalist, colonial power while "consciously struggling against inequality in local arenas" (DuPuis et al., 2006, p. 241).

The Food Justice Get-Togethers and the Mobile Food Campus are present in these local arenas. Figure 9 shows the points in the city where the BFPC has been active thus far in tandem with these two collective actions. Activity is still concentrated in the city center, but it is slowly expanding outward. BFPC activity also includes cultivating urban–rural connections between Berlin and Brandenburg through its projects of reinforcing regional value chains with community-supported agriculture models. These intend to resist the highly concentrated food retail structures in Germany and their dependency on global, capitalist agri-food exploitation. It is in this manner that the BFPC practices reflexive localism and organizes its collective actions to catalyze resistance and structural transformation.

Figure 9. Places of action with Food Justice Get-Togethers (yellow symbol) and Mobile Food Campus (rose symbol).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The BFPC's various collective actions indicate a potential for promoting the democratic transformation of the Berlin food system through the active participation in and co-determination of food politics. The incorporation of the BFPC's positions into the Berlin Action Plan represented one key step in overcoming political inequalities in the city's urban planning. Current developments of a second version will involve a more intersectional and multiscalar approach to food justice as derived from the Food Justice Get-Togethers and the Mobile Food Campus. It remains an open question whether the Berlin government will adopt these latest extended demands.

Activists stress the need for knowledge co-production as an important element in the practice of food democracy, and they are therefore sensitive to critical points of exclusions in the predominantly white, middle-class, academic alternative food scene. However, other difficulties persist in strategies for overcoming structural inequalities. The focus on food education, common to many projects, may hinder

political transformation: "Too many people think that they can save the sector with education policy measures. And then these education policy areas see themselves as completely removed from politics. They don't want politics to take place in their area" (Interview_1, 2023). Despite the recognition of different types of knowledge and a willingness to collaborate and innovate—as in, for instance, proposals for a new logistics of local food consumption (or *Lebensmittelpunkte*)—the project sometimes risks allowing quotidian matters to eclipse the more fundamental objective of structural transformation.

Another challenge involves intersectional inequality and exclusion. When comparing the period of the founding of the BFPC to its condition eight years on, several activists and documents chart a deterioration; they refer to larger numbers and greater diversity of engaged citizens in the founding phase of the BFPC. The development of the catalog of demands (BFPC, 2017) punctuates this trend, according to one interviewee: "At that time it was also about writing this policy paper, establishing the cornerstones, so to speak. And the plenums were also much fuller, there were 160 people. We don't experience anything like that now" (Interview_11, 2024). This change in BFPC participation is strongly linked to certain political moments and projects and raises questions about the internal social reproduction and legitimacy of the BFPC as they pertain to fundamental ideas of democratic participation, co-determination, and representation.

In almost all conversations, BFPC activists brought up a lack of time and related conflicts between paid labor and unpaid activism: "I would say that the main problem we are seeing right now, or that I see, is: How much can you do on a voluntary basis?" (Interview_2, 2022). These barriers were more severe for those struggling with serious socio-economic constraints, especially when they were obliged to deal with intersecting inequalities simultaneously. One of the most profound challenges in this context is cultural differences and language, or, more broadly, the ability to communicate the ideas of ecological, democratic, and just food. Many such alternative concepts were developed by and according to the worldview of German academics, and that can occlude other perspectives.

Finally, agenda-setting may not always match the real priorities of Berlin's population. A more recent focus on food poverty is promising and is indicative of a counterbalance to the following critique:

> Urban food initiatives tend to focus on topics of sustainability and environmental protection….As a result, there is often a narrow focus on sustainability in expense for questions of justice and equity….The limited discussion in the burgeoning German urban food initiative scene of food poverty and food-related unequal participation in social life is still concerning. (Rosol, 2023, p. 78)

A combination of challenges facing the BFPC threatens to limit its efforts. These are: a shortage of long-term members, a scarcity of time, difficulties facing unpaid labor and its funding, and a lack of strategic and democratic agenda-setting necessary for transcending social, cultural, and epistemological divisions. Such obstacles are exacerbated by the difficulties arising when struggling for political influence at the municipal level, as local governments fail to recognize that "food is political" (Interview_1, 2023), and that food politics requires cross-sectoral action. Consequently, local political realities seriously limit the transformative potential of the BFPC. But BFPC activists are well aware of these challenges and are working to reorient their actions so as to unite diverse citizens in the development of a just and democratic strategy responsive to different groups and political subjects, their needs, and what they envision for Berlin's food system.

This study has shown that the BFPC answers the critique of class and racial blindness (Slocum, 2007) and aims to overcome a certain "unbearable whiteness" (Guthman, 2011) of alternative food initiatives. Enormous barriers in overcoming structural and intersectional food inequalities still persist (Alkon, 2014; Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Motta, 2021b), but some practical success has been registered, for example in the publication of multilingual materials, an internal awareness process, targeted project work on diversity and participation, agenda-setting for food justice and food poverty, and the multiscale approach to the city and its diversity of communities in rural, urban, and regional surroundings. Hopefully, such strategies will be adopted by other FPCs, AFNs, and food movements in Germany and beyond.

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