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The Role of the Public Sector in Food Systems Transformation: What to Enable Through Urban Farming?

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Environmental
Social Science
Research Group

What Drives Food Systems Transformation?

Seven simultaneous transformations

- Sustainable land resources & soil health
- Precision agricultural practices
- Diet change & novel food transition
- Good nutrition & health
- Food loss & waste reduction
- Healthy freshwater & marine ecosystems
- Climate change & biodiversity conservation

6 Socio-economic Drivers

- Network & values (social capital, peer learning)
- Gender, age & family
- Education & information ← most consistently cited
- Income & prices ← dominant across all regions
- Politics, policy & institutions ← least researched!
- Infrastructure

- Chrisendo et al. (2026) Nature Food — systematic review of 349 studies, 1,700 screened
DOI: 10.1038/s43016-026-01317-0

Urban Sprawl

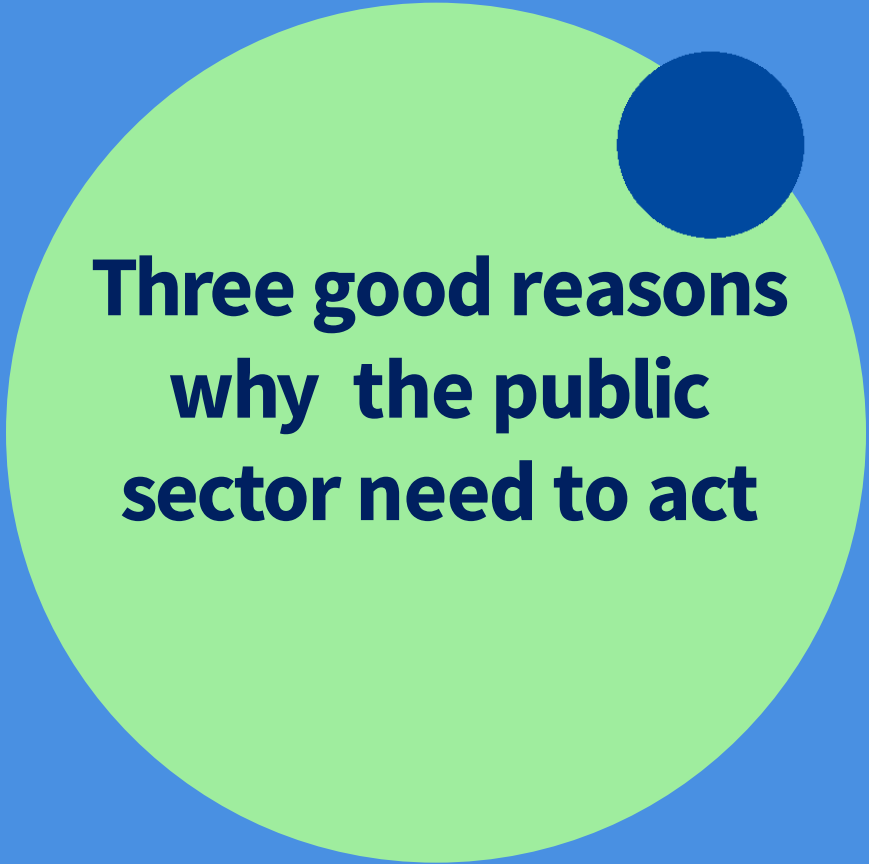
Cities in Central Europe are consuming peri-urban farmland at an accelerating rate. Without public intervention, productive agricultural land is permanently lost to development.

Food Inequity

Ultra-processed foods dominate urban diets. Deprived communities lack access to fresh, affordable food — a market failure that only the public sector can structurally address.

Climate Stress

Cities face heat islands, flooding, and ecosystem degradation. Urban food production offers proven nature-based co-benefits that extend far beyond nutrition alone.



**Three good reasons
why the public
sector need to act**



FAO ECA Urban Food Systems



HOLY FOOD

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What We Know:

- Over 80% of ECA population will live in cities by 2050 — urban food governance has never been more urgent
- Peri-urban agriculture is chronically underutilised despite its proximity and potential
- Ultra-processed food dominance is driving a nutrition transition with rising diet-related disease
- Municipalities are key actors but often lack mandate, tools, and cross-sectoral capacity
- Grassroots food initiatives exist — but need public enabling conditions to scale

ESSRG's Role

- Co-identified key challenges with local governance actors and municipalities in BIH, ÜZB, ARM
- Showcased innovative grassroots initiatives to inform policy pathways
- Facilitated dialogue across government, civil society and food system experts
- Groundwork for a FAO regional work programme on urban food

A FRAMEWORK FOR FOOD SYSTEMS INTEGRATION

FOODCLIC (EU HORIZON 2022–2027) · 8 EUROPEAN CITY-REGIONS · BUDAPEST LED BY ESSRG + BUDAPEST MUNICIPALITY

C – Co-benefits: Urban farming delivers multiple simultaneous wins: food, biodiversity, climate resilience, mental health, education, and community cohesion.

L – Spatial Linkages: Reconnecting city and countryside. Short supply chains, peri-urban farming zones, producer–consumer proximity.

I – Social Inclusion: Transformation must reach the most vulnerable. Community gardens, accessible markets, school food programmes.

C – Sectoral Connections: Food crosses health, planning, environment, education and economy. Integrated policy means breaking departmental silos.

Five Enabling Roles of the Public Sector

From evidence across ESSRG projects

- **01 Land:** Secure and designate peri-urban land for food production. Prevent sprawl, create urban farming zones, offer long-term land access to communities and cooperatives.
- **02 Policy:** Make food systems visible in urban planning, health, environment, and education policy. Budapest Food Strategy (ESSRG + Municipality) as a model.
- **03 Infrastructure:** Provide water, tools, composting, seed libraries, trained professionals. CoFarm4Cities pilots: allotments, orchards, school mini-farms as public assets.
- **04 Civil Society:** Support community gardens, food councils, farmer markets, solidarity initiatives.
- **05 Procurement:** Use public catering (schools, hospitals, municipalities) to build demand for local, sustainable food.

Budapest Food Strategy

ESSRG + Budapest Municipality • FoodCLIC Living Lab

- *"Healthy and local food will be a cultural norm for all Budapest residents. The main drivers of change will be education, urban agriculture, and a regulatory environment that supports local food production."*
- **FoodCLIC Budapest Living Lab Activities:** Food Policy Network, Living Lab experiments with deprived communities, Workshop for food environments in 2050, Permaculture training in city districts, participatory food environment research with single parents, Farmer–Miller–Baker Network — local supply chain showcase, food inequality mapping

- www.essrg.hu



Urban Farming and the 7 Transformations

Urban farming cuts across multiple transformation pathways simultaneously

- **Diet and Nutrition:** Urban farms supply fresh, local produce to deprived communities. Direct access shifts diets away from ultra-processed foods
- **Biodiversity and Climate:** Urban green infrastructure delivers cooling, water retention and pollinator habitat. NBS on degraded peri-urban land.
- **Land Use:** Reclaiming degraded peri-urban land for food production prevents urban sprawl and restores soil health
- **Education :** Peer learning and social networks are more effective than campaigns. School farms and community gardens build exactly this capital.
- **Short Supply Chains, food loss reduction:** reconnect producers and consumers — a key to community cohesion.
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From Evidence to Policy: What Needs to Happen Now

City municipality level

- Adopt integrated urban food strategies
- Create Food Policy Councils with multi-stakeholder representation
- Zone peri-urban land for permanent agricultural use
- Leverage public procurement to build local food demand

National level

- Provide legal frameworks that recognise urban farming as legitimate land use
- Fund municipalities to build capacity and employ urban food professionals
- Incentivise short supply chains and sustainable agri-food businesses

Key Messages

Urban farming is not a hobby:

it is a strategic public infrastructure investment

Public sector must move from permitting to actively enabling:

land, resources, policy, procurement

Transformation requires integration:

no single department can do it alone

Evidence shows the model works: pilots in 5 cities prove replicability. The question is not whether to act, but how fast and how boldly

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**The Public Sector
as Urban Food
Enabler**