



# Food, Climate & Cities

A deep dive into citizen-informed  
directions for food systems transition

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Food systems are often approached through efficiency and supply chains. The [Global Citizens' Assembly's] framing, connecting food to climate, health, equity, and livelihoods, should be prioritised because it reflects a more accurate understanding: food systems are deeply interconnected systems that shape and are shaped by human and ecological relationships.



Wakanyi Hoffman, The New Institute and Global Citizens' Assembly Strategic Advisory Board

# About this Deep Dive

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This Deep Dive is part of a series from the Global Citizens' Assembly exploring different dimensions of food systems transformation in the context of the climate crisis.

Food systems are the focus for 2026 because they cut across climate, health, equity and livelihoods. They are where planetary pressures and everyday realities meet, from extreme weather and rising costs to trade disruption, energy shocks and growing concerns about food security. This makes them a powerful entry point into climate governance.

Its central insights are drawn from 22 Calls to Action developed through the 2026 Global Assembly on Food and Climate, where 105 people from 60 countries and territories deliberated on food systems and climate change over seven weeks. These insights are situated within a wider ecosystem of participation through analysis of more than 7,000 participatory processes worldwide, contributions from local assemblies and exchanges with practitioners, researchers and experts working across food systems, climate, governance and systems change, including Ertharin Cousin, former Executive Director of the UN World Food Programme; Sandrine Dixson-Declève, Former Co-President of the Club of Rome, Executive Chair of Earth4All; Kirsten Dunlop, CEO of Climate KIC; Wakanyi Hoffman, writer and African Indigenous Knowledge scholar & researcher; Dr. Bonny Ibhawoh, professor of History and Global Human Rights at McMaster University; Sir Geoff Mulgan CBE, professor of Collective Intelligence, Public Policy and Social Innovation at University College London; and Otto Scharmer, Senior Lecturer at MIT and founder of the Presencing Institute.

Together, these sources help identify emerging public priorities, tensions and directions on how food systems need to be transformed and governed to ensure they are more resilient, equitable and sustainable.

This Deep Dive should not be read as a technical policy blueprint or statistical survey. Its value lies in what emerges when people from very different realities are given the time, information and space to work through complex questions together, exploring what food-system transformation could look like in practice and what it may require from governments, institutions, communities and citizens.

For the full framing, methodology and sources, see [Appendix A](#), [Appendix B](#) and [Global Citizens Assembly website](#)

# Why this matters now

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More than half of the world's population now lives in cities, and the decisions made in urban areas will play a significant role in shaping the future of food systems, climate resilience and quality of life.

Yet many cities have become increasingly disconnected from the systems that sustain them. Food, water, nature and the communities that produce and steward these resources often remain largely invisible in daily urban life, despite being essential to long-term prosperity and resilience.

At the same time, cities are becoming important arenas for climate and food-system transition. Decisions about planning, housing, transport, public space and food access increasingly shape how communities experience climate change and respond to its impacts.

Across the 2026 Global Assembly on Food and Climate and the wider landscape of participation, a consistent insight emerged: healthier, fairer and more connected cities are often more resilient cities. The priorities explored in this Deep Dive reflect growing interest in reconnecting cities with the systems that sustain them, while creating urban futures that are more resilient, equitable and rooted in place.



# Public priorities emerging

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## 1. Reconnecting cities with food, nature and the landscapes that sustain them

“ The responsibility to do all this... does not belong only to the rural areas, because the food is not only to be produced there. Cities can also contribute producing their own food through urban gardens and community spaces... Real sustainability requires collaboration between farmers, between citizens, governments, and also the private companies.

— Participant, 2026 Global Assembly on Food and Climate (Colombia)

Across the assemblies, a consistent theme emerged: cities have become increasingly disconnected from the ecological systems that sustain them.

Food often appears in cities only at the point of purchase, obscuring the people, ecosystems and resources involved in producing it.

Food-growing repeatedly emerged as something that should become a normal part of city life rather than an exception. Community gardens, local markets, rooftop agriculture and neighbourhood growing spaces were all identified as ways of strengthening resilience while reconnecting people with food and nature.

This pattern is also visible across the wider participation landscape. Urban participation is frequently centred on green spaces, urban agriculture, urban planning and sustainability, suggesting that cities are increasingly being viewed as places that should be reconnected with nature rather than separated from it.

Another recurring theme was the relationship between cities and the surrounding landscapes that support them. People expressed concern about the loss of farmland, forests and natural ecosystems to poorly managed urban expansion. They questioned whether current models of development adequately account for the long-term importance of food production, biodiversity and ecosystem services.

Protecting natural landscapes was not viewed as competing with human development. Rather, healthy ecosystems were seen as foundational to long-term prosperity, resilience and quality of life.

**For city leaders, planners, funders and policymakers, this suggests that urban resilience cannot be treated solely as an infrastructure challenge.** The assemblies point towards a broader understanding of cities as part of wider ecological systems. Protecting and strengthening the relationships between urban areas, food-producing regions and natural landscapes may be as important to long-term resilience as investments in transport, housing or public services.

## 2. Cities as catalysts of climate transition

“ The key problem is not cities growing themselves, but the lack of strategic planning, because when you have building without control, it destroys productive farmlands and ecological systems.

—  
Participant, 2026 Global Assembly on Food and Climate (Russia)

Across the assemblies, cities emerged as one of the most practical and meaningful arenas for climate action.

While international agreements remain important, many of the decisions that shape emissions, resilience and quality of life happen locally through urban planning, infrastructure investment and the design of public space. Climate transition was often discussed not as an abstract global challenge but as something experienced through housing, transport, food access, public services and neighbourhood design.

This pattern is also visible across the wider participation landscape. Around the world, cities are increasingly using participatory processes to shape climate strategies, urban planning decisions and long-term development pathways. Examples include the Barcelona Citizens' Climate Assembly, the Tallinn Climate Assembly and Future Montevideo, all of which sought to connect public priorities with the future direction of the city.<sup>1</sup>

Cities were viewed not simply as places where climate impacts are experienced, but as places where solutions can be developed, tested and scaled. Urban transformation was rarely framed as a purely technical challenge. Instead, it was seen as a broader societal project requiring difficult choices about infrastructure, investment, development and quality of life, while balancing environmental sustainability, economic wellbeing and social inclusion. In Grenoble, the Metropolitan Citizens' Climate Convention's recommendations spanned categories such as education, carbon capture, agriculture, and mobility; the Musqueam First Nation Comprehensive Community Plan in British Columbia saw environmental protection as one facet of community and cultural protection and tribal sovereignty.

**For city leaders, planners and public authorities, this suggests that cities are uniquely positioned to translate climate ambition into practical action.** Many of the choices that shape emissions, resilience and quality of life are made at the urban level, where climate goals must be balanced with everyday concerns such as housing, transport, development and public services.

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<sup>1</sup> See [Appendix B](#)

### 3. Designing healthier, fairer and more resilient cities

“ I live in a little developing city where many families are dependent on agriculture. So, in our city, changes in weather and even water directly affect livelihoods that we have. Global policies and local actions together are very important and crucial to support.

—  
Participant, 2026 Global Assembly on Food and Climate (Russia)

A recurring insight across the assemblies was that healthier, fairer cities are often more resilient cities.

Discussions about food systems frequently became discussions about health, affordability, public services and quality of life. Access to healthy food, clean environments and thriving communities was recognised as being unevenly distributed across cities, with these inequalities often shaping how people experience climate and food-system challenges.

Questions of justice emerged throughout these discussions. Inequalities in access to fresh food, healthy environments, public services and opportunities to shape local decisions surfaced repeatedly across the assemblies. Access to good food was not seen as a lifestyle choice but increasingly as a matter of fairness, resilience and public wellbeing.

**Alongside questions of access and fairness, the role of nature in creating healthier and more resilient cities emerged as another recurring theme.** Green spaces, urban rewilding and other nature-based approaches were valued not only for their environmental benefits but also for their contribution to healthier, more liveable communities. As climate pressures intensify, bringing more nature into cities was increasingly viewed as an important way to strengthen resilience while improving quality of life.

**Food growing in cities emerged as a particularly tangible example of this connection between environmental resilience and community wellbeing.** Market gardens, vertical farms and community growing spaces were seen as ways to improve access to fresh food while reducing dependence on fragile supply chains. Their wider social value was also frequently highlighted, including their potential to strengthen community ties and reconnect people with food, nature and one another.

These discussions ultimately led to broader questions about how urban decisions are made and who gets to shape them. Across the assemblies, people worked through trade-offs around land use, food systems, environmental protection, development and public investment. What emerged was a recognition that more resilient cities will depend not only on technical solutions and physical infrastructure, but also on governance systems that strengthen trust, build social cohesion and meaningfully involve residents in shaping the future of their communities.

**For urban planners, local governments and public authorities, this suggests that resilience should be understood as more than a question of infrastructure and climate adaptation.**

Across the discussions, healthier, fairer and more connected communities consistently emerged as important foundations of long-term resilience.

## ASSEMBLIES IN ACTION: Urban Indigenous Community Assembly in Aldeia Maracanã, Rio de Janeiro

Aldeia Maracanã is the only urban Indigenous village in Rio de Janeiro. Located beside Rio's iconic Maracanã stadium, the community exists within a highly urbanised environment while maintaining strong cultural and social ties to Indigenous traditions. Despite living in one of Brazil's largest cities, residents face challenges including water insecurity, inadequate housing, limited planting space and a lack of formal recognition by the State.

In 2026, members of the Indigenous peoples who make up the Aldeia Maracanã community came together to explore the relationship between climate change, food systems and urban Indigenous life. A central question emerged: is climate change also an urban Indigenous issue?

For many participants, climate change was something associated with forests, rivers and distant territories. Through discussion, they began to recognise how it was already present in their own lives: extreme heat, the rain that floods the homes of indigenous people living in favelas on the hillsides. The flowers blooming out of season. The chickens and ducks they raise because sometimes there is nothing else to eat.

“ **Because we live outside the forest, we think it's not our problem. We think it's only a problem for those who live in the forest. But it is our problem too.** ”

For one of the participants, the discussion was transformative. She later reflected that she had never connected the heat, the water shortages and the challenges facing the community to the wider climate crisis. The assembly helped her see that these experiences were not isolated problems, but part of a larger story in which urban Indigenous communities are also living with the impacts of climate change.



The assembly surfaced practical proposals, including:

- Demanding municipal water connection, sanitation infrastructure and secure housing.
- Advocating for expanding climate discussions to better reflect the experiences of urban Indigenous communities.
- Creating a community growing space for herbs, fruit and vegetables, with an aspirational goal to develop a cassava flour house, contingent on space for cassava cultivation.

The discussions concluded with a shared traditional meal of fish roasted in banana leaves. For participants, the meal symbolised something deeper than hospitality: one participant later reflected that the gathering had helped “[bring] us back a feeling of our roots.”

**The Assembly highlights a central message of this Deep Dive: cities are not separate from climate change, food systems or nature.** Even in one of the most urbanised settings imaginable, participants emphasised the importance of reconnecting people with food, land and community, while ensuring that voices often absent from urban planning and climate debates are included in shaping the future.

# Directions for action

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The findings from the 2026 Global Assembly on Food and Climate and wider ecosystem mapping suggest several priorities for policymakers, city leaders and practitioners seeking to build more resilient and sustainable urban food systems.

1

## **Integrate food systems into urban planning**

Food systems should be considered alongside transport, housing, energy and water when planning for resilient cities.

2

## **Protect and expand space for food-growing and nature**

Cities should support urban agriculture, biodiversity and green infrastructure through planning frameworks, zoning regulations and public investment.

3

## **Strengthen links between cities and surrounding food-producing regions**

Urban resilience depends on healthy relationships with the landscapes and communities that sustain cities. Policies should protect farmland and support regional food systems.

4

## **Embed participation into urban decision-making**

Cities are one of the places where food, climate and land-use decisions can be influenced most directly. Citizens should have meaningful opportunities to contribute to urban planning, climate strategies, food policy and land-use decisions.

5

## **Measure success beyond growth alone**

Urban development should be assessed not only through economic growth, but also through food security, climate resilience, biodiversity, public health and community wellbeing.

# Closing reflection

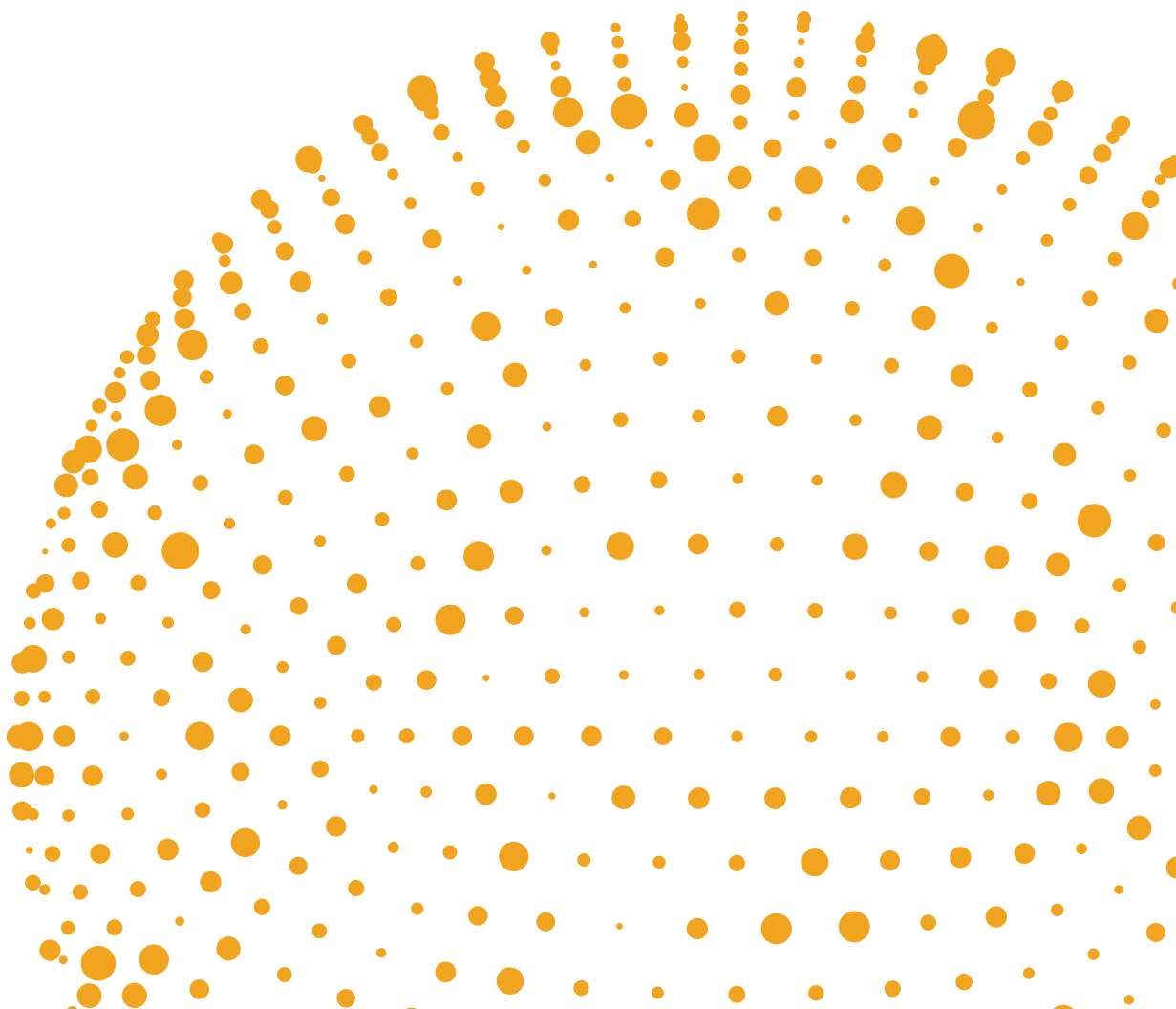
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Across the 2026 Global Assembly on Food and Climate and the wider landscape of participation, a consistent message emerges: cities cannot be separated from the food systems that sustain them.

Urban food security, public health, resilience and environmental sustainability depend on relationships that often remain hidden from daily life — relationships with farmers, ecosystems, watersheds, supply chains and surrounding rural regions.

Many of the solutions discussed throughout this Deep Dive already exist in different forms around the world. The challenge is not simply identifying what needs to change, but creating the conditions for healthier, fairer and more resilient cities to emerge. This requires recognising cities not as isolated urban centres, but as part of wider social, ecological and food systems on which they ultimately depend.

At a time when climate change, food insecurity and social pressures are becoming increasingly interconnected, participation offers a way to navigate complexity collectively. Not simply to improve decisions, but to build the understanding, trust and legitimacy needed to shape urban futures that are resilient, equitable and connected to the systems on which they depend.





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