



CENTRE FOR
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Urban Food Commoning: Implications and Opportunities for Amsterdam

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1. Introduction

Our current global and industrial food system is failing to address challenges such as healthy food access, sustainability transitions, and opportunities for participation (Ilieva, 2016; Wiskerke, 2009). The food commons has been celebrated as a means towards a food system that embeds sustainability, justice, and care (Vivero-Pol et al., 2019). Cities are considered important places to establish food commoning practices, as they drive food consumption, distribution and production. As such, if we want to transform the food system, we need to adapt new food practices in cities. New practices related to urban food commons (Morrow, 2018), or community-governed food resources in cities, will connect to perspectives that view food as a human right (de Schutter, 2014) and a public good (McClintock, 2014).

If we adopt an urban food commons lens, what are the implications for the City of Amsterdam? And what could urban food commons offer for the city? With the seed grant sponsored by the Centre of Urban Studies, University of Amsterdam, we carried out five seminars, one food tour and a closing symposium at Pakhuis De Zwijger in 2022. In those seminars, we invited academics and practitioners to sit together to talk about food commoning in perspectives of food policy, agroecology, culture, circularity and democracy. Based on a year of fruitful discussions, we outline the key implications and opportunities of food commoning for Amsterdam.

The seminar series on food commoning was organized by researchers from the Centre for Urban Studies (University of Amsterdam) and the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and includes contributions from academia (such as Wageningen University, Utrecht University, Flevocampus, The ILS – Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development, and the University of Washington), community initiatives (such as De Kaskantine, Cascoland, Voedselpark Lutkemeerpolder, and I can change the world with my two hands), and government officials (City of Amsterdam).

The report consists of three parts. First, we will give a brief introduction to the urban food commons. Second, we present six main insights from the seminar series. These insights give an overview of current food commoning practices in Amsterdam. Third and final, we provide a list of recommendations for researchers, professionals and communities, specifically for those working and living in Amsterdam.

2. What are the urban food commons?

Commons are traditionally seen as natural resources governed and managed by communities. Today, this has been expanded to include both material (e.g. water, energy, and food), and socially produced non-material resources (e.g. knowledge, language, education). Maintaining a commons requires adhering to institutional rules as formulated by Ostrom (1990), related to context-specificity, monitoring, and sanctioning. Therefore, the commons directly underlines the role of democratic governance for bringing collective ownership into reality.

The commons can be extended to the urban context when land, infrastructure and public spaces are also considered as common pool resources. The production and reproduction of the urban commons has also been argued to comprise of resources, institutions and communities (Kip, 2005). Theory and practice share the view that the urban commons “ought to be accessible to, and able to be utilized by, urban communities to produce and support a range of goods and services important for the sustainability of those populations, particularly the most vulnerable populations” (Foster and Iaione, 2020). Accordingly, social justice and related principles of material equality and democratization of decision-making are at the heart of urban commons.

Recent debates of the commons are contrasted with *commoning*. Unlike the commons, which is said to be static or a noun, commoning is a process (Leitheiser et al., 2021; Gibson-Graham et al., 2016). Hou (2017, 2018) further distinguishes commoning as an attempt to move beyond the influence of state institutions to pursue different forms of participatory self-governance and envision a society where neoliberalism is not predominant. While the intended goals of the commons and commoning do not strongly differ, the commons could be characterized as more institutional agenda setting, whereas, commoning has wider aims in (institutional) system transformation. For the sake of simplicity in this report, we will use the terms interchangeably.

This research project considers how we can re-envision local food systems through the urban commons lens. Our current global and agri-industrial food system fails to serve the common good in terms of public health, environmental care, and democratic control (Clapp, 2018; Vivero-Pol, 2019). The role of a few key players (e.g. FAO, national governments, companies such as Unilever and Nestlé) in dominating the food system is evidence enough that we are far from a food system that is governed as a commons. A food commons perspective highlights valuing food as more than a commodity. Rather, it underscores the multiplicity of values embedded in

food, such as a public good, a renewable resource, and a cultural determinant (Vivero-Pol, 2017). Despite the dominance of the agri-industrial food sector, we can see a widespread movement of initiatives across the globe that aim to incorporate social justice and environmental sustainability concerns into our food system. Through a *re-localization* of our food system, and the governance of it, from the global to the local level, we see potential for creating space for food commoning practices (Wiskerke, 2009).

In this process of re-localization, cities, and their governments, and most prominently their citizens, take the lead. International frontrunners, such as Belo Horizonte, Toronto and Milan, have demonstrated the potential of re-localizing food practices and food governance, through putting issues of justice and care central in the food system. We can also witness this transformation in the Netherlands, with several cities developing food policies (see e.g. municipalities active in the City Deal Healthy and Sustainable Food Environment) or establishing food councils (e.g. Amsterdam, Ede, The Hague). Here we witness shared goals of reconnecting food consumption and production and re-embedding the food system in broader social and cultural systems. The City of Amsterdam is one of the Dutch cities that has been involved in food policy making, so far in a stop-and-go process (Van der Valk et al., 2021). More recently, the City of Amsterdam has also appointed a urban commons organizational unit that aims to foster commoning practices in the city.

Practices related to urban food commons and commoning foreground co- or self-governance in our food system. In practice, this can include establishing food policy councils (Leitheiser and Horlings, 2021) and food rescue networks (Morrow, 2019). Creating alternative ecosystems and networks attempt to challenge the dominating players of the industrial food system. Other such practices can include citizens exchanging their urban garden harvest to lower dependence on food commodity markets, producers establishing symbiotic relations with social and natural ecosystems, and organizing logistic networks for re-distributing food surplus. Furthermore, a food commons approach highlights the many values of food, as a public good, a human right, a renewable resource, etc. (Vivero-Pol, 2017). A food system which sheds light on these many other values of food can include short food supply chains that producers and consumers and strengthen local economies, community gardens which bring social cohesion and green space to neighborhoods, and agroecology and food forests to enhance the biodiversity of urban areas. Adapting the lens of commons and commoning to value food practices in an urban food system helps set an agenda to create more sustainable, just, and healthy urban areas.

3. What can urban food commons offer the City of Amsterdam?

The seminar series consisted of presentations by researchers, professionals and communities on the urban food commons. The following table presents guests speakers and their presented topics to our seminar. Based on their contributions, the organizing team summarized three steps and seven main insights from research and practice.

Theme	Speaker	Organization	Topic
#1 Food policy councils	Anna Wissmann	FoodE Project, The ILS – Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development, Bonn	Food Policy Councils in Germany and Neighboring Countries
	Alanya den Boer	Athena Instituut, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam	Voedselraden in Nederland: Navigeren en Uitdagingen
	Liane Lankreijer	Voedselraad Den Haag	Het kan: gezond, eerlijk, en duurzaam voedsel uit eigen regio
#2 Agroecology	Dr Maarten Crivits	Flanders Research Institute for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (ILVO)	Keeping the city awake: short story of a Hungry City
	Leonardo van den Berg	Agroecologie Netwerk Nederland	Agroecology and the Commons
	Claudia Theile	Voedselpark Amsterdam	The case of the Luktemeer Voedselpark
#3 Culture and diversity	Dr Esther Veen	Flevocampus, Aeres Hogeschool Almere	Understanding diversity in diets
	Anna Kooi	Cascoland	Cascoland: Food as a creator of communities of care
#4 Circularity	Dr Lucie Sovová	Rural Sociology research group, Wageningen University	Gardens, Commons & 'Quiet Circularities'
	Menno Houtstra	Kaskantine	Economic Sustainability for the Food Commons

	Roel Schoenmakers	Cascoland	Circularity & food commons
#5 Democracy and Civil society	Dr Ozan Alakavuklar	School of Governance, Utrecht University	Organising surplus food differently: alternative value relations in a diverse economies context
	Natascha Hagenbeek	I can change the world with my two hands	I can change the world with my two hands: Food Commons seminar
#6 Concluding session	Prof Jeff Hou	Urban Commons Lab, University of Washington	Urban food commoning in international perspective
	Dr Federico Savini	Urban Planning, University of Amsterdam	Food commoning and degrowth
	Loes Leatemia	Program manager Food Strategy, City of Amsterdam	Amsterdam's Food Strategy and the Food Commons
	Nathalie van Loon	Project leader Commons Agenda, City of Amsterdam	Food and Urban Commons

Table 1: List of events, themes, and speakers.

The insights derived from the seminars are presented in a three-step approach: (1) building a joint narrative on urban food commoning; (2) building an ecosystem of food commoners; and (3) creating legal and financial space within existing frameworks to nurture the commons. Each of the steps are explained below.

A joint narrative on urban food commoning

The first step of stimulating food commoning in Amsterdam requires the development of a joint narrative on urban food commoning and its potential to residents and professionals alike. The seminars provide three insights what this narrative could consist of: (a) valuing the everyday practices of residents and communities (coined here as 'quiet sustainability'), and (b) symbiotic relationships between humans and non-humans. Creating a strong narrative can help inform and better frame the transformative power of the commons.

Insight 1: Valuing ‘quiet sustainability’

The seminars highlighted how existing food practices are, in many cases, examples of ‘quiet sustainability’ (Sovová; see also Daněk et al., 2022). Many communities tend to their environment with care and re-use existing materials in their gardens and related food practices. Natascha Hagenbeek (seminar #5) stated that with small, everyday practices, there is potential to change greater systems.

Community initiatives were seen to practice “quiet sustainability” by intentionally not bringing attention to activities which might actually disrupt their ability to exist. For example, Hagenbeek revealed that the community garden, *I Can Change the World With My Two Hands*, does not officially have a permanent rental contract with the municipality. They continue to work on their land and persevere with their initiative, and have yet to receive news that they must relocate. While this *ad hoc* approach allows them to exist, it presents a major oversight in initiatives’ ability to plan long term and the recognition of the value they are to the city.

These examples are often not recognized as contributors to sustainability and circularity ambitions, because they usually fall outside formal policies and frameworks. Furthermore, engaging in these formal frameworks could potentially even hurt “niche” initiatives, who prefer to operate on the fringes. In the closing seminar, Jeff Hou precisely distinguishes the difference of commons and commoning in practices. As he stated: ‘ *Traditional commons in practice are often designed as an enclosed system in order to sustainably manage the resources and prevent free riders, for instance, whereas “commoning” in practice requires an open border for people, materials, knowledge, and other forms of resources to flow and aggregate. Through food commoning, one can share and put food in the hands of those in need, to address the challenges of precarity, equity, and social justice.* ‘ This points to the necessity of a broader perspective of recognizing, valuing, and nurturing initiatives beyond their economic use, which could be offered through an urban food common lens and framework.

Insight 2: Establishing symbiotic relationships with nature through agroecology

Across the seminars, more symbiotic relationships with nature were proposed. To this end, the concept of *agroecology* is useful (as discussed in session 2). Following the FAO (2022), agroecology is “a holistic and integrated approach that simultaneously applies ecological and

social concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agriculture and food systems.” Agroecology fits within new frameworks that underscore to live more in harmony with nature, considering humans and more-than-humans. To illustrate, leading voices in commoning and degrowth argue that inspiration could be derived from indigenous tribes (e.g. animism; Hickel, 2022).

Agroecological approaches integrate the use of ‘old’ technologies with ‘new’ insights, demonstrating how nature itself provides capital and principles that could be applied in (urban) agriculture. The presentation from Van den Berg in session 2, illustrated the growth of agroecology in the Netherlands, in terms of farms, sales, and especially education and networks. While the interest and enthusiasm is there, farmers often struggle with obtaining space and recognition to stimulate this growth and meet the capacity of interest. Similar to insight 1, principles from nature are often unrecognized and unvalued in dominant policy making and economic systems. As a result, we observe a need to better also recognize the use of ‘old’ technologies and their potential to both ecological and social values and services.

As the seminars indicated, the City of Amsterdam is active with and ready for transformative food system change. Re-framing initiatives and actions to reflect a contribution to a joint food commons narrative and solidarity throughout could further strengthen impacts and networks in this area.

Building an ecosystem of food commoners

The second step is the establishment of a food commoning ecosystem, in which active residents, professionals and researchers could meet, inspire and help each other. Our seminar series revealed two insights for establishing an ecosystem: (a) a holistic approach to food that moves beyond market transactions, (b) the need for intermediaries and linking pins such as food councils and (c) ensuring accessibility, diversity and care. The insights demonstrate that the City of Amsterdam has an active group of professionals, volunteers, residents and researchers that work on food commoning, but that this ecosystem could be better connected and nurtured.

Insight 3: Giving form to different economic models

In our current economic system, the most weight is given to market capital, transactions, and consumption. Many participants reflected upon different kinds of economies and values embedded in a (food) commons. Both Sovovà and Alakavuklar (seminar #4, #5) made

reference to a community and diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006), which foregrounds economic practices existing outside of market economies. With regards to food, this can include food waste initiatives (highlighted by Alakavuklar) and sharing garden produce (highlighted by Sovovà). In contrast to many market economies, these food practices prioritized social relations and community care.

Another economic model was witnessed through a focus on circularity and reliance on a pluriform understanding of capital. While more growth-oriented initiatives opted for *specialization*, the initiatives in our seminars underscored the importance of *integration*. For example, De Kaskantine created closed loops in food and waste cycles by gathering food waste from local businesses (seminar #4). To create those loops, different forms of capital were used: social capital, technological capital (i.e. nature; see also insight 2), and distributive capital (e.g. no waste). Accordingly, reliance on financial capital decreases and new, valuable economic models could be established. To date, these models often exist on the neighborhood level with limited interaction beyond.

These economic forms were still challenged by the necessity to somewhat engage with market systems, which led to an unfortunate irony: the system they were protesting was the same system that challenged their ability to survive. While many initiatives were resourceful and relied on volunteer labor, this was not always a sustainable solution, and often resulted in volunteer burnout.

Insight 4: Establishing intermediaries for food commoning networks

Amsterdam holds several initiatives that form intermediaries within the local and regional food system. Examples include the citizen-led Food Council Metropolitan Region Amsterdam, the platform Voedsel Verbindt with more institutionalized partners, and research networks such as the Amsterdam Network for Food Planning. In addition, several 'street-level bureaucrats' work on behalf of the Municipality of Amsterdam closely with these initiatives. As such, there is a promising ecosystem already in place for nurturing food commoning practices.

Anna Wissman, who helps coordinate a network of more than 60 food councils in Germany, noted how intermediaries, such as food policy councils, can give attention to accessibility and affordability, as well as a fair price for farmers, in the food system (seminar #1). Such

organizations can build off of food policies or municipal policy goals, which exist in many Dutch cities, including Amsterdam. Other speakers from the first seminar mentioned the importance of rooting and connecting initiatives - also the top-down with the bottom-up. Intermediaries, who aim to connect these parties, could therefore also strengthen the greater food commons ecosystem. A more systematic connection across various municipal departments was also stressed to help the role of intermediaries. Furthermore, a clear role of different parties, as well as the intermediary in different spaces can enhance the effectiveness of such an initiative.

Insight 5: Ensuring accessibility, diversity and care

Practices of urban food commons have different degrees of accessibility. The seminars showed both negative and positive experiences for ensuring accessibility. On the negative side of the coin, the accessibility of practices was challenged by two developments. On the one hand, public green spaces were put under pressure and increasingly becoming privatized (for example very visibly by fencing). This can be triggered by property developers, but equally by communities who 'claim' the land for their uses. For example, some urban agriculture initiatives ('*volkstuintjes*') provide limited access to outsiders. On the other hand, many urban food commons initiatives have a limited reach. The initiatives are dominated by a dedicated group of residents and professionals, but have fewer ties with wider neighborhood networks (let alone beyond). Connecting the initiatives with each other, and communicating their existence and potential to wider networks could be a way forward to put the initiatives (literally) more on the map.

On the positive side of the coin, some practices actively promoted accessibility. For instance, Cascoland deliberately works with different communities in their diverse neighborhood in cooking, fermentation, and related food preparation activities using food waste streams (seminar #3, #4). Such activities build up networks of care and trust in neighborhoods between citizens that do not always meet and interact with each other. As a result, these activities make food commoning accessible to new groups that may have less affinity with commoning. Establishing new relationships are deemed crucial for making food commoning more inclusive.

Considering the steps for building an ecosystem together, we need to establish more firmly an intermediary to which all stakeholders in Amsterdam can relate and consequently can link residents, researchers and professionals with each other. Current intermediaries are too often

only tailored to a specific audience (e.g. communities, businesses or researchers). Furthermore, re-thinking accessibility in existing initiatives could help to connect to not-yet involved stakeholders.

Building legal and financial space for the food commons

The third and final steps entails the need for building legal and financial space for the food commons. We can not only establish a joint narrative and an ecosystem, but we also need to create the right institutional frameworks that support food commoning. For this, the seminars provided two insights: (a) overcoming political ambivalence between competing and sometimes conflicting policy goals and (b) using land more as a strategic resource to pursue the food commoning agenda.

Insight 6: Striving for food democracy by overcoming political ambivalence

On a higher, political level, the seminar series revealed disconnected policy goals in the City of Amsterdam: many policies aim to stimulate regional economic growth, while others simultaneously aim to stimulate local food initiatives and nurturing urban commons practices that do not fit within existing economic models. Such disconnections currently obstruct food commoning practices. Discussions in the seminars pointed towards a need for sharper decisions (or at least more alignment between opposing forces) (seminar #4, #5, #6).

The development of the Voedselpark Amsterdam at the Lutkemeerpolder gives a strong example. Here is one of the largest pieces of fertile land close to the city and could provide many benefits to local environments, economies, and would be of great social value to the city. Nevertheless, the municipality is still planning to build a distribution center on this piece of land. While this would be an opportunity for the municipality to show its commitment to food initiatives and urban commons, economic growth is still prioritized.

In the seminars, initiators of community projects sometimes raised their disappointment. Their projects are used to profile the city as a progressive place, yet they do not feel the support to sustain their initiatives. To illustrate, places such as De Ceuvel are visited frequently by policymakers and other parties that sometimes have less affinity with the original aims of the initiative, so the original intimacy may fade into the background. This could hinder upscaling. It also raises the question to what extent the City of Amsterdam is committed to commoning and

its principles. The establishment of a programme on urban food policymaking and an urban commons unit are promising, but seem to snow under in urbanization and densification processes in Amsterdam.

Insight 7: Navigating scarcity of land and resourcefulness

The lack of access to physical space was seen to be a common denominator in many community initiatives seeking to create their own “food commons”. More than a problem in urban areas, Van den Berg highlighted how short-term land tenure is an issue for farmers across the whole Netherlands, especially those focused on agroecological production (seminar#1). However, many initiatives had resourceful methods to locate their own “cracks” in securing their commons. In addition to the previous example of *I Can Change the World With My Two Hands* (see Insight 1), Cascoland described their ability to locate public or semi-public space for community gardens. They described the importance of space to create communities (seminar #4, seminar#5).

These examples were however limited to small neighborhood plots and largely only for short-term or an unknown amount of time. The initiative Voedselpark Amsterdam is looking to secure the Luktemeerpolder and have only faced an uphill battle until now. This instance shows that it is not only a problem of scarcity, rather structural barriers to access where economic values are prioritized over social and environmental uses (Van der Valk et al., 2021). As Savini put it in the concluding session, this is largely a matter of political will since the Municipality of Amsterdam either owns or could control land use in the city.

4. Implications and opportunities

The seven insights provide fundamental questions about the prevailing values of the social, political, economic and cultural system in Amsterdam. Our insights reveal that urban food commoning may have a large potential, yet also is constrained by a range of barriers. Below we present a list of suggestions that aim to seize the potential of urban food commoning, and to overcome the constraints. The suggestions are derived from discussions at the concluding session with more than 20 participants. The suggestions are tailored towards three audiences: researchers, public officials and communities.

Suggestions for researchers

- Develop grounded approaches to study urban commoning practices: how commoning is seen in practice, and to connect these insights with theoretical frameworks on commoning;
- Develop connections with professionals and communities in Amsterdam by sharing research and data through open-source platforms (i.e. openresearch.amsterdam) and events, for which in particular the Academische Voedselwerkplaats Amsterdam would be suited;
- Develop spatial analyses that map public and private lands that provide opportunities for food commoning. Who is in control of this land, and what could food commoning offer to these owners?;
- Develop a transdisciplinary research network and collaboration as an advisory body of food networks to create more interlinkages between theory and practice.

Suggestions for public officials

- Identify synergies between the urban food policy and commoning agenda in Amsterdam in order to create more leverage for (food) commoning practices;
- Get inspiration from already more-established platforms and inter-departmental organizational units such as Amsterdam Rainproof and Buurtgroen020 to build up a movement. The Food Council MRA could play a key role here;
- Re-center food as an interdisciplinary approach in linking social and sustainability issues: connect food commoning initiatives building further on existing city-wide networks that target the built environment (e.g. Buurtgroen020) or public wellbeing (e.g. neighborhood work). This could benefit the accessibility of food commoning practices;

- Identify substantial institutional support for facilitating food commoning in accordance to different scales, purposes and types of practices, including access to the space, financial subsidies that meet the scale of initiatives

Suggestions for communities

- Participate in city-wide platforms and umbrella organizations to connect with other community initiatives and share knowledge and best practices;
- Secure institutional and financial support by defining the holistic potential of your initiative, thus being able to attract resources from the physical and social domain;
- Develop capacities and networks to recognize, request and secure funding and development opportunities

The suggestions are summarized in the table below.

	Building a narrative	Building an ecosystem	Creating legal and financial space
<i>Researchers</i>	Translating insights (e.g. in this document) to professional and community audiences	Document resources necessary for the thriving of a food commons ecosystem	Research opportunities for enabling alternative conceptualizations of legal/financial spaces
<i>Public officials</i>	Joint process using Amsterdam's Food Strategy as basis; complemented with community and research insights	Endorse and support intermediary that has widespread support among citizens, professionals and researchers	Political prioritization through policymaking and land use plans; Food commoning hub for support (legal, financial, human)
<i>Communities</i>	Sharing insights and defining key lessons; Applying the food commons narrative to their own practices.	Re-think accessibility in their initiative; Join existing platforms (Food Council MRA, Voedsel Verbindt); Strengthen networks with other initiatives (e.g. Buurtgroen020)	Experiment with different financial and legal models, through institutional support (e.g. subsidies from the municipality)

Table 2: Suggestions for researchers, communities and public officials.

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