Design opportunities in sustainable food services: B Corp parameters for restaurants

Ellen Gonzalez[1], Manuela Quaresma[2]
gnzellen@gmail.com, mquaresma@dad.puc-rio.br
[1]PUC-Rio, Brazil
[2]PUC-Rio, Brazil

Abstract

Based upon a literature review on food system sustainability notions related to food systems, this paper presents connections and overlaps between B Corp guidelines and a basic structure of food design, focusing on the practical implications of a restaurant certification process. The study interprets critical aspects of the food system in the restaurant industry and looks towards the multiple necessary service design project constraints, implications, and opportunities within the sustainable food systems, an immediate and relevant intersecting subject.

Keywords: sustainable food systems, food design, food service design, certification

Introduction

The world's population is estimated to reach 10 billion in 2050, and food systems need to be reviewed to feed all these people. Milestones set by several governmental and non-governmental agencies and considering a more sustainable way of life are vital in conserving and protecting all forms of life on the planet. The United Nations proposed the most relevant call to action in 2015, depicted by 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) (UN, 2017). Those objectives preconize the end of poverty and protection of the planet, aiming at a more economically, socially, and environmentally balanced scenario by 2030.

The concept of "sustainable diets" (FAO et al., 2021), introduced by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 2010, reinforces the relationship between food systems and the concern for planetary and people's health. According to the UN SDGs (UN, 2017), the balance to conserving and protecting all life forms on the

planet is closely linked to agricultural cultivation, animal husbandry, and the entire food production and consumption chain. Diets with low environmental impact contribute to food and nutrition security and healthy lives for present and future generations, protect and respect the ecosystems' biodiversity, and are more resilient and economically equitable. It also means they are accessible, culturally acceptable, and safe while optimizing natural and human resources (FAO, 2019). Under this concept, many food practices developed in the last two generations resulted in unsustainable farming processes, measuring productivity by quantity rather than quality, lacking concern for the planet's health while increasing damage to human health caused by food shortages or surplus (Aguilera, 2022).

The article offers an overview of sustainability applied to restaurant services based on a literature review of the Service Design approach to sustainable food systems and specific food and restaurant-related publications. The study goes over the B Corp parameters, discussing its applicability to restaurant businesses and foreseeing a path for practical actions related to building resilient food ecosystems in the food and beverage business. To complement the theoretical analysis of the procedure, the writer's experience as a professional chef adds functional insights to the perception of the certification process and principles applied to restaurant services, interpreting the constraints, opportunities, and implications of this strategy.

Service, Food, Design

Design has approached food in different aspects, with professionals designing edible objects, packaging, visual media, experiences, and product-service systems connected to food production, consumption, and disposal cycles (Zampollo, 2017; Reissig, 2019; Schifferstein, 2015).

Designers can envision and project more responsible food production-consumption systems, critically addressing socioeconomic and cultural demands while tackling human and planetary health (Ballantine-Brodie et al., 2013).

Moreover, Design can conceive more humane relationships and alternatives for this industrial-scale food system, relying on a more balanced local production, processing, distribution, and consumption, minimizing waste and disposal. Regionalizing the food system fosters the development of local society and economy,

benefiting the environment and promoting relationships (Franqueira, 2009; Manzini, 2010).

According to Zampollo (2017), Food, Society, Environment, and Technology are fundamental pillars on which designers, chefs, and food-related professionals should base their projects and investigations. Significant matters must be considered within this complex system, as per Figure 1.

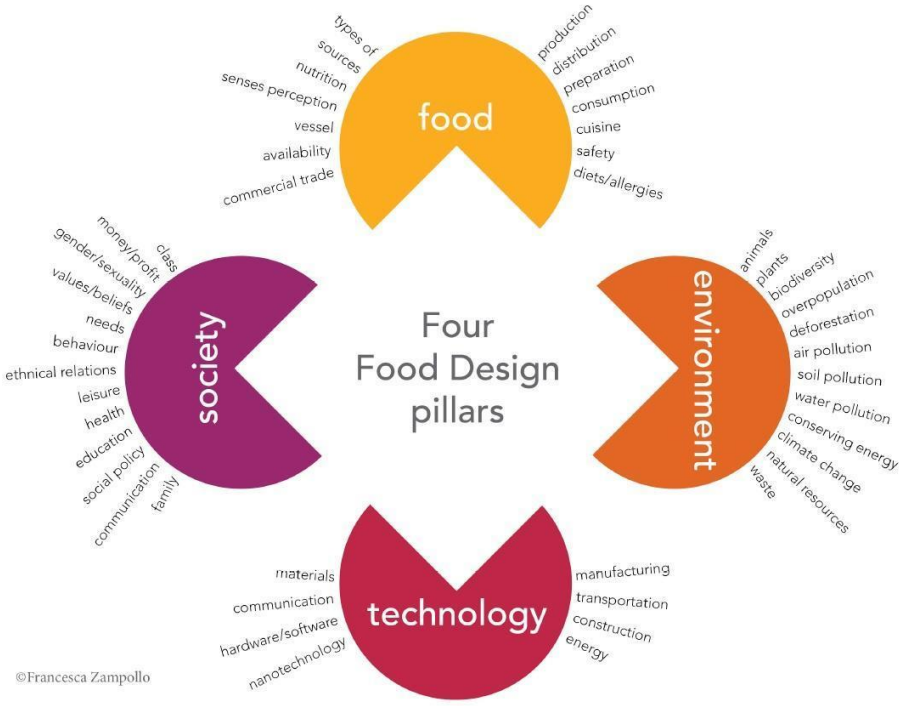

Figure 1. Four Food Design Pillars. Zampollo, 2017.

The food source matters considerably to support more resilient food systems in restaurants. Where food comes from is connected to human-nature interaction, community relationship arrangements, and economic impacts. Likewise, it is deeply bonded to ethical factors, including animal welfare, crop diversity, raising, harvesting, trading, distribution, losses, and waste.

The next step, food preparation, and service, highlight aesthetic features. The menu reflects culture and context awareness and shall contemplate safety, nutrition, and restrictions, not forgetting cooking process techniques and plating.

Technology encompasses using materials to produce anything that is manufactured or artificial. Besides nurturing, food is a material for designers to work with, and food service offers many opportunities for food production, communication, and distribution technologies, with more or less negatively impacting alternatives.

There is no service design without users and no food service without society. Food (or the lack of it) relates to and cuts across individuals and communities, affecting them economically, socially, and culturally. Individuals impact their surrounding environment when dining out, promoting interactions amongst multiple players, values, and scenarios (Fischer& Garnett, 2016)

As an integral part of the environment, fully merged with the ecosystem, the society shall use natural resources mindfully and circularly. Service Design innovation based on a circular economy relies on designing waste out of the system as a path to restore and regenerate, minimizing negative results (Zampollo, 2018). When food is the material to design with, the responsibility is even more remarkable, for wasting it means throwing away essential survival supplies.

In restaurants and other commercial food venues, awareness and control are elemental to optimizing asset use and financial balance, maximizing the materials' life cycles and potential. Good restaurant service contemplates sensorial and experiential attributes allied to minimum natural and human resource expenses and negative ecosystem impacts. Guidelines, parameters, and tools exist to make this task more attainable.

B Corp certification

"Driving continuous improvement for high-quality social and environmental business standards" and "measuring a company's entire social and environmental impact" are two of the defining sentences presented on the website for the B Corporations, or B Corp (https://www.bcorporation.net/en-us/), leading inclusive, equitable, and regenerative economy certified enterprises. Since 2006, they have offered a transparent, comprehensive tool for general business performance analysis in companies who believe success measurement exceeds economic revenues and dedicate effort to reducing social and economic inequality and promoting healthier natural and human environments.

Responsible businesses are willing to commit even further, promoting continuous global improvement and social change, assigned to B Corp certification to assess and improve performance unceasingly. Companies interested must register, comply with local legal requirements, then apply for the B Corp Assessment. Some criteria may vary, but general stages include a minimum social and environmental evaluation score, resulting in the certification.

For the food businesses, the main distinction between B Corp to organic/fairtrade similar labels is the opportunity to authenticate the broader range of processes involved in the food supply chain. It also reflects consumer recognition and supplier relationship, constructing a wider community web. Amid over 5,800 certified businesses up to 2022, only 34 are in the food service, reflecting the hindrances to measuring, managing, and implementing more balanced restaurant ecosystems.

B Impact Assessment journey

The researcher conducted a simulation of the B Impact Assessment (BIA) in August 2022, using her artisan pastry company as the object. The assessment was taken thoroughly, following the step-by-step guide proposed on the website. The objective of this simulation was to know the proposed questions and understand how the parameters proposed fit the food businesses model within an integrated view to evaluate impact, affecting the five main stakeholder groups: governance, workers, customers, community, and environment. It was also possible to understand how B Corp criteria work. Figure 2 shows a synthesis of the five categories examined and their main aspects.

A couple of set steps, required during the affiliation process, divide the process into three general moments, as shown in Figure 3:

- assessment - focused on the impact on the company's stakeholders, evaluating general policies and practices;
- comparison - the impact report offers the chance to review and compare provided details with benchmarking information; and
- improve - the candidate can access a tailored improvement report, offering guidelines to implement a positive impact.

Impact area	What's covered	Information found
Governance	mission and engagement; ethics and transparency	c-suite, finance, legal
Workers	financial security; health, wellness, and safety; career development; engagement and satisfaction	human resources
Community	diversity, equity, and inclusion; economic impact; civic engagement and giving; supply chain management	corporate social responsibility; human resources; procurement
Environment	environmental management; air and climate; water; land and life	purchasing; sustainability; facilities and operations
Customers	customer stewardship	sales and marketing; customer experience

Figure 2. B Corp Impact Assessment areas. (https://www.bcorporation.net/en-us/).

Figure 3. Company journey towards certification. https://benjie.ch/en/blog/we-have-decided-to-start-the-b-corp-certification-process-n45

Comparing food design pillars and B Corp assessment parameters

In the restaurant businesses, the BIA and the Four Food Design pillars presented by Zampollo (2017) express much of the restaurant operation structure. These benchmarks can be compared and quite often overlap. For the study purpose, Zampollo's four pillars will be crossed with the five criteria considered in the B Corp Impact Assessment, reinforcing relevant standards' application in the food and

beverage sector. Figure 4 below unfolds the criteria analyzed in the BIA. Technology and environment show up in both structures, so they will be directly related to aspects of the food chain, while Workers + Customers + Community (BIA) represent a zoom-in into Zampollo's (2017) Society.

The classic view of the supply chain works as a pathway for analytical purposes, reducing the countless stages into production, processing, distribution, and consumption, serving as a sequence guide for this investigation, as shown in Figure 5. An inventory of the primary SDGs related to the theme brings a second layer of action relevance to this reflection.

This comparison has indicated how the fundamental aspects of the Food Design are equivalent to those analyzed by the B Corp Assessment, reinforcing Food Design user-centered Service Design approach, and how food crosses transversally all society aspects, namely human resources, the community and customers behaviors, and interactions, as well as their correlation with the surrounding environment.

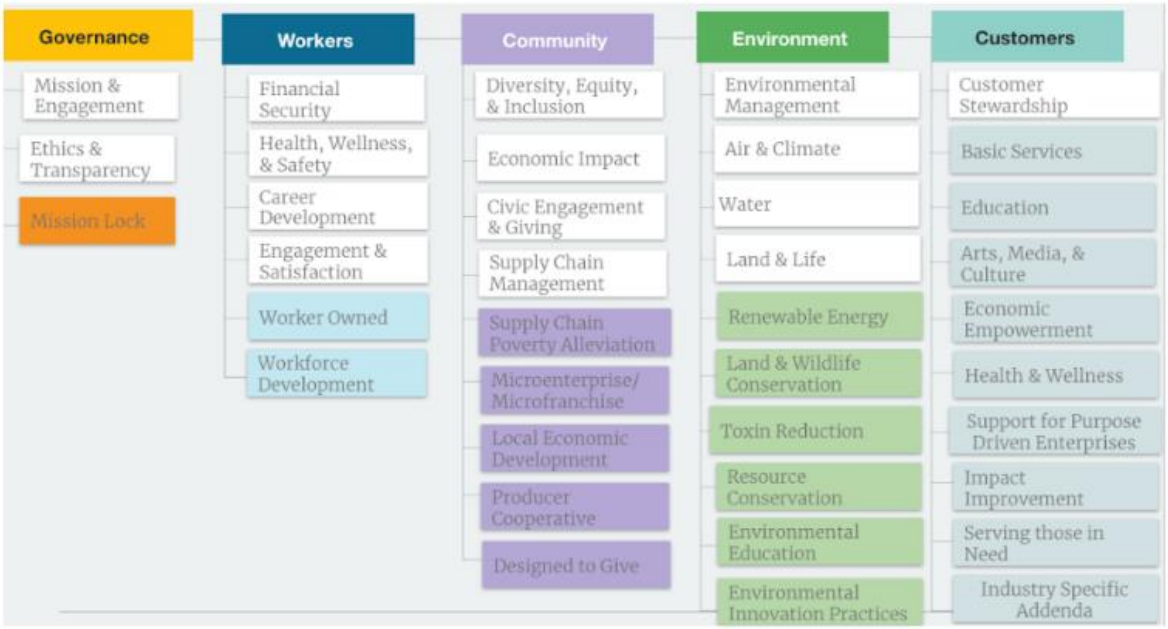

Figure 4. BIA categories (https://www.bcorporation.net/en-us/).

Figure 5. The Food System (USDA,2017).

Food and Environment

The first step in the food supply chain concerns production closely connected to the site: land use, distances traveled, seasonality, locally suitable crops or husbandry, and community. It ends with final use and / or disposal, addressed by SDG 12 Responsible Production and Consumption.

The growing method of preference on plants or animals brings up multiple agricultural models, with numerous ethical and environmental implications: free range or caged animals, animal feed or grazing, mono or polyculture, genetically modified and chemically dependent versus organic, biodynamic, agroforest and other consortium models. All choices result in more or less balanced systems, with distinct

footprints for the territory regarding nature conservation or degradation, as firmly pointed out by SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities, SDG 13 Climate Action, SDG 14 Life below water, and SDG 15 Life On Land.

Food and Technology

The technology involved in food processing and distribution since agricultural production has incorporated particular choices (clean or renewable energy, materials, tools, and machinery), also tackled by SDG 7 Affordable and Clean Energy and SDG 9 Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure.

The food industry increasingly offers a range of processed and overprocessed alternatives, refining, consequent taste standardization, loss of nutritional value, and food deserts (Nestlé, 2002). Ethical choices on how food items are grown and processed profoundly impact people's general health, food security, availability, and nutritional characteristics. Moreover, technology contributes much to communication (logistics, consumer information, and outreach), shelf life, food safety, and distribution.

Food and Governance

Food is dealt with in terms of product and service, alongside enterprise legal and financial aspects and physical structure. This topic establishes an overall panorama for the company, impacts, ethics, and transparency. It also scrutinizes preferences, how the main corporation messages are regularized, disseminated, and implemented within the company, and the stakeholder's engagement.

On the assessment, this detailed section identifies sensitive matters for the food industry, determining the eligibility for the B Corp certificate: commerce of alcohol, bottled water, animal products, GMOs, water and energy use, tax evasion or other fraud situations, the well-being of workers in general, and suppliers with negative social or environmental impact. These are acute and recurring issues in the restaurant businesses, resulting in few enterprises being accredited with the credential.

Society & Community, Workers, Customers

In this comparison structure, humane components shall be put together, with a broader understanding brought by Zampollo's Society and the more detailed impact

on people's lives brought by the BIA. These three categories analyzed by the BIA comprise much of the presented Society structure (Zampollo, 2017) and point to more equitable paths for modern society, as per SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities and SDG 12 Responsible Consumption and Production.

These three society stakeholders connect to the business commitment and social and economic impacts within the community. They also encompass minorities, inclusion and equity, charity, social engagement, and specifically targeted local problems.

Within the Workers' topic, questions measure how the company complies with health, financial and general well-being and overall satisfaction. They also inquire about salary agreements, training, monitoring, education incentive, and parental leave in a gender-neutral approach. Higher scores are obtained by business models partially owned by non-executive employees and those that have workforce development programs to support individuals with barriers to employment.

The last loop on the food chain is the customer, and the certification offers specific metrics on the final products and services, including ethical marketing and directed actions towards underserved communities and individuals.

Sustainable food principles into practice

The presented cross reference on food systems and sustainable practices serves as guidelines to review and improve the current actions of restaurants and the general food industry. Restaurants have a long, but not impossible, path ahead and can benefit from these set standards to guide them through a less degrading business model. The B Corp assessment is a tangible example of orientating principles to be followed by enterprises in general, willing to reduce negative impact and start building a more resilient system.

The food and beverage sector has historically neglected holistic health aspects in favor of immediate customer satisfaction and has given little attention or effort to implement policies that could achieve both. Flavor and nutrition, essential maxims for any meal, have given space to cheap, fast, readily available, and culturally homogenized dishes, influenced by the misconception that eating similarly around the globe reflects the overthrow of frontiers. Instead, it is ever more apparent that

local food is best where it is grown, and importing food without the complementing culture is a mistake (Barber, 2015; Pollan, 2008; Waters, 2022).

Restaurant owners and brigades, in general, have lost the ability to explore and value seasonal, fresh, local ingredients, exchanging them for overprocessed, cheaper items, frequently using foodlike substitutes. The menus showcase lovely storytelling, the dining rooms get fancier, and marketing strategies replace overall food quality for immediate economic benefits, smearing the long-term social consequences of these choices.

Minimizing and tracking restaurant food trail, loss, and waste is an example of how technology can provide economic benefits of a more conscious supply chain, besides the ongoing animal and plant raising developments. Ethics and overall well-being shall never be left aside when dealing with food matters.

Another recurrent issue within this industry is related to labor and socioeconomic consequences. Frequently populated with a high-turning workforce, restaurants rely on migrants, minorities, underpaid, vulnerable, and unskilled individuals as cheap labor to compensate for high operational costs—many questions throughout the B Corp assessment highlight this remarkable food business characteristic.

Understanding food provision as a comprehensive, complex matter, touching each aspect of everyday life, is a way to connect food service and users, contemplating all of the stakeholder's needs alike. Overall, the presented guidelines serve as a tool to scrutinize an evaluate routines, making it possible to understand weaknesses and plan a shift toward far-reaching sustainability.

Conclusion

Designing services within the community context means they are embedded in a larger social purpose and benefit more than the individuals directly related to the product-service exchange. This concept grounds the B Corp principles and shall establish sustainable, collaborative service design practices co-produced by people within their environment (Sangiorgi, 2010, 2017; King & Mager, 2009).

Ingredient's choice is directly linked to their source, finding food production at its end. The way food is grown, including the people who grow it, and the often long chain

from farm to table affects society in its most fundamental right, making it a most relevant subject.

Service Design has a broad field to explore within restaurant services, contemplating more sustainable ways to design not only customer experiences but also tackling the whole food chain. From understanding the food chain, cycles, and processing to delivering the best possible meal, social, economic, and environmental sustainability are crucial to preserving or saving culturally and nutritionally appropriate foods without damaging the planet.

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