

Policy Brief

Public Food Procurement as a Powerful Tool to Boost Territorial Food Systems

In order to shape a 'robust and resilient food system', the European Commission proposed a 'Farm to Fork strategy'¹, with concrete objectives on sustainable food procurement and the EU School Scheme related to school food and education. This policy brief provides recommendations on how to achieve these objectives with a focus on three key areas:

1. How to link small-scale farmers with the public plate;
2. School meals as a powerful tool to address social equity (all school children and young people), health (tackling fast-growing child obesity) and education (food culture linked to territory);
3. Enhancing multi-level food governance through national networks of procurers.

EU policymakers have the possibility to implement several actions to build a more inclusive Sustainable Public Sector Food Procurement (SPSFP) and to enable public canteens to be a catalyst of food system transformation. The recommendations identified in this policy brief have the potential to boost a transition toward a more sustainable and inclusive food system, building resilient city food regions.

Over the past 20 years, 40% of small-scale farmers¹ have disappeared from the European Union because of the rapid concentration of land and consolidation of large food businesses leading to a smaller number of larger farms with less diversity. In addition, the ongoing rural exodus is expected to get worse as the average age of a farmer in the EU is now 57 years and many farmers are expected to retire in the coming decade. It is essential to reverse this trend and support small-scale farmers to foster the development of resilient and sustainable food systems. Indeed, industrial farming is not conducive to food system transformation due to the size of farms, the nature of business and the unsustainable production methods that are used. Moreover, industrial farming increases the EU dependency on global food markets, with negative impacts on both our climate and our food system resilience, health and sustainability.²

Public food procurement is in a unique position to link up with and support small-scale farmers and has a lot to gain from engaging with small-scale farmers. First, small-scale farmers who adopt sustainable production methods (e.g. agroecology, organic) can ensure sustainable and more secure access to fresh,

diverse and seasonal food. Second, by linking with these farmers, cities can help to create more diverse and resilient urban-rural food systems, and develop circular economies. Linking public canteens with small-scale farmers also has the potential to strengthen the resilience and cultural significance of city-region food systems. Third, sustainable public food procurement can also provide a steady income to small-scale farmers through short food supply chains, overcome market risks, ensure fair prices and guarantee decent work conditions. In short, it can be a powerful tool for food system transformation, with direct benefits in terms of our climate and public health.

However, the EU public procurement legislation and practices are often not appropriate for small-scale farmers, smallholder suppliers and their organisations. Some of the barriers that stop small-scale farmers from applying to public tenders include: complex and burdensome tender procedures, over-emphasis on price as the awarding criterion, onerous participation requirements, supply capacity, lack of information on tender opportunities and long payment periods.³

Policy Highlights

The EU should ensure minimum procurement standards to support small scale farmers. EU policymakers should publish clear guidelines on how to purchase food from small farmers in public tendering and promote innovative procurement models such as dynamic food procurement.

The EU should guarantee healthy and sustainable school meals and food education for every schoolchild. Providing healthy and sustainable meals to school children and young people is one of the most powerful tools to achieve socially just access to food for the youngest generations, and tackle rapidly growing child obesity.

The EU should promote multi-level food governance with national networks of procurers. EU policymakers should cooperate closely with local and regional governments (LRGs) to institutionalise sustainable public food procurement as part of a multi-level governance framework.



EU Policy Recommendations

As a result of the work developed in the [COACH project](#), and building on the '[Manifesto for establishing minimum standards for public canteens across EU](#)⁴ co-developed by participants of the [EU Food Policy Coalition](#), this policy brief makes the following policy recommendations addressed to EU policymakers:

The EU should ensure minimum procurement standards to support small-scale farmers

EU policymakers should publish clear guidelines on how to purchase food from small-scale farmers in public tendering and promote innovative procurement models such as dynamic food procurement. For instance, the '[Manifesto on minimum standards in public canteens](#)⁴ suggests that *'at least 10% of food originates from small-scale farmers, defined by turnover, agricultural area and number of employees'* as a baseline criterion. This type of measure would ensure that all EU food public procurement procedures would involve a minimum share of small-scale farmers' produce.

This 'Farm to Fork' Procurement [Manifesto](#)⁴, which is part of the European multi-stakeholder Initiative [Buy Better Food](#)⁵, calls for the establishment of minimum standards for public canteens in Europe and proposes actionable criteria across seven thematic areas: healthy food, organic and agroecological products, small-scale farmers support, climate action, social economy and labour rights, fair trade, and animal welfare standards. Under each category, the Manifesto proposes ready-to-use criteria that can be added to the food procurement tenders as well as verification methods to ensure compliance by the providers.

Many local governments across Europe are already showing the way. Torres Vedras, a municipality in the Portuguese district of Lisbon, endorsed the Manifesto together with other local governments across Europe, to show their commitment

toward the adoption of healthy and sustainable procurement standards. On the 11th of October 2022, Laura Rogriguez, the Mayor of Torres Vedras and a Buy Better Food member and a COACH Project 'beacon', handed over to the European Commission the [Sustainable Food Procurement Manifesto](#) and the petition to guarantee a [healthy school meal for every child in every school](#)⁶.

Existing good practices, such as the Minimum Environmental Criteria (MEC) adopted by the Italian government, show that minimum standards have the potential to create more organic food production, less food waste and a stronger link to territorial food production and supply. https://www.slowfood.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Case_study_Slow_Beans_ENG-1.pdf

The EU should guarantee healthy and sustainable school meals and food education for every school child.

The [European Child Guarantee](#)⁷ aims to ensure that *'that every child in Europe at risk of poverty or social exclusion has access to the most basic of rights like healthcare and education'*, leaving no child behind. According to the EU Child Guarantee, Member states should guarantee 'at least one healthy meal each school day'. Therefore, EU policymakers are expected to cooperate with the Member States in order to ensure that every child in the EU will have the right to at least one healthy and nutritious meal per day.

Providing healthy and sustainable meals to school children and young people is one of the most powerful tools to achieve socially just access to food for the youngest generations, and tackle rapidly growing child obesity. Healthy and sustainable

school meals bring many advantages. First, they provide access to healthy and sustainable food, which is healthy for both schoolchildren and the environment (planetary health diets). Second, they support food security and the realisation of the right to food. Food at school is sometimes the only warm meal a child receives that day. In addition, food at school can make up more than 50% of daily energy intake for many EU children, supporting food security. Third, healthy and sustainable school meals help tackle child obesity, which, according to a [2022 report of WHO Europe](#)⁸, is of 'epidemic proportions' with almost 1 in 3 children (29% of boys and 27% of girls) overweight or living with obesity in Europe.

The [EU School fruit, vegetable and milk scheme](#)⁹ promotes the consumption of fresh fruit, vegetables and milk as well as 'educational measures' in schools across the EU. Fruits, vegetables and milk sourced from territorial food systems should be an important component of a healthy school meal. In addition, educational measures that connect the youngest generation with the primary production of food is essential. The combination of locally sourced food with food education and cooking in school curricula can further strengthen the link to regional food and culture and thus lead to more resilient and sustainable food systems.

When providing healthy and sustainable school meals, EU policymakers and member states must make sure to reach all school children and young people. They must also support educational activities such as farm visits and cooking to raise awareness about the importance of short food supply chains among the youngest generations. The [School Meals Petition](#)⁶ advocates for School Meals and Food Education for all school children and young people across the EU.

The landscape around sustainable food procurement, and in particular school meals, varies considerably across the EU. While many schools and cities, or in the case of the Netherlands; the whole country, do not provide school meals at all, some EU Member States such as Sweden, Finland and Croatia and cities like Berlin in Germany and Tallinn in Estonia provide free school meals to children and young people. Some cities are at the frontline of providing healthy and sustainable school meals, offering, for instance, high percentages of organic food. Other cities offer less or no organic food in schools but have a much higher national school meals coverage, such as countries in Eastern Europe. Finally, some countries, such as Finland, Denmark and Czech Republic have a strong focus on food education and even offer cooking in their school curricula.

Enhancing multi-level food governance with national networks of procurers

In Europe, local and regional governments (LRGs) have the mandate to procure food for public canteens, which is why they can be considered major agents of change to build a territorial food system. Hence, EU policymakers should cooperate closely with LRGs to institutionalise sustainable public food procurement as part of a multi-level governance framework. Vertical cooperation among different governance levels is needed in order to address national, European, and global challenges in local dimensions.

Simultaneously, EU policymakers should consult and exchange views with other stakeholder groups involved in the food procurement process, such as farmers' organisations, NGOs, civil society organisations, SMEs and the private sector. This is crucial to effectively design a collaborative tendering process according to local needs.

An important measure to foster multi-level food governance is the promotion and creation of national networks of public food procurers and procurement specialists. Through peer-to-peer exchange and trainings, public procurers have the possibility to learn how to procure innovatively, for instance, by applying pre-tender market engagement and dynamic food procurement and linking tenders to online markets. These exchanges are key to create linkages and support concrete ways to involve small-scale producers in the public food demand.

In Denmark, a strategy for green public procurement has been adopted at the state level. It includes Official Dietary Guidelines which aim to promote healthy and sustainable eating habits in the population. To make this strategy effective at the local level, the national policy is being designed with involvement of all administrative levels. Accordingly, the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries of Denmark cooperated with the cities of Aarhus and Copenhagen as well as the Ministry of Climate. Furthermore, partnerships have been established with catering and retail industries, Health Council Cities, national agencies, and NGOs. Such collaboration of various actors around green public procurement is promising.

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COACH is an EU funded project which aims to facilitate collaboration between farmers, consumers, local governments and other actors to scale up short agri-food chains which rebalance farmers' position, create win-wins for producers and consumers and drive innovation in territorial food systems. <https://coachproject.eu>

Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI) is a global network of local and regional governments committed to sustainable urban development by influencing sustainability policy and driving local action for low emission, nature-based, equitable, resilient and circular development. <https://iclei.org>

CityFood is a flagship program of ICLEI that aims to accelerate local and regional government action toward sustainable food systems transformation. It spans a number of projects and initiatives across all of ICLEI's Regional Offices and brings together local and regional governments as well as critical global and regional partners. Its clear mandate is leveraging the power of food for resilient futures. <https://cityfood-program.org>

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