

Policy Brief

Local and Regional Governments Have a Key Role to Play in the Transition to Territorial Food Systems

Linking public canteens with small-scale farmers allows local and regional governments (LRGs) to bring environmental, social and economic benefits to their territory. It also allows them to source fresh, healthy and seasonal food for the public canteens from short supply chains. Sustainable Public Sector Food Procurement (SPSFP) can be considered as a leverage to support small-scale farmers who adopt sustainable production methods (e.g. agroecology, organic) across Europe. Indeed, it can provide them with a steady demand as well as fair income and decent working conditions. Since local and regional governments (LRGs) have the mandate to procure food for public canteens in the EU, the purpose of this policy brief is to provide LRGs with insights on how to connect small-scale farmers with food tendering processes in legally compliant ways. LRGs can apply more inclusive sustainable food procurement procedures while respecting the existing EU regulatory framework and principles. In doing so, LRGs have the potential to support small-scale farmers and save them from disappearing across Europe.

In Europe, in the last 20 years, 40% of small-scale farmers have disappeared because of the rapid concentration of land and consolidation of large food businesses. This trend is mainly due to the neoliberal food system market structure, leading to the rural exodus. This phenomenon is expected to worsen as the average age of a farmer in the EU is now 57 years and as farmers retire in the coming decade this will bring negative impacts on food system resilience and sustainability. 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.¹

Sustainable Public Sector Food Procurement (SPSFP) can directly support small-scale farmers. It can be seen as an agent of change to achieve social, environmental and economic goals

through a demand-driven approach.

Indeed, local and regional governments (LRGs) are in a unique position to source healthy and sustainable food from small-scale farmers, supporting the transition to resilient food systems.

However, the existing EU public procurement regulatory framework and practices are often not appropriate for small-scale farmers, smallholder suppliers and their organisations. Some of the barriers that small-scale farmers face in applying for a public tender 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.² Local and regional governments (LRGs) are uniquely positioned to push the food market toward a green and fair transformation through public food procurement. Good practices across the European Union, from Copenhagen to Milan, from Torres Vedras to Ljubljana show it is possible and cost-effective.

Policy Highlights

Local and regional governments should organise market engagements with smallholder suppliers.

Local and regional governments should implement strategies that enable the participation of small-scale farmers in the public tendering.

Local and regional governments should invest in infrastructures to increase the number of on-site kitchens.

Local and regional governments should guarantee healthy and sustainable school meals and food education for every school child.



Policy Recommendations

As a result of the work developed in the [COACH](#) project and in the [EU Food Policy Coalition](#) (see the [Farm to Fork Manifesto](#)³), this policy brief makes the following policy recommendations on minimum standards addressed to LRGs. The objective of these recommendations is to increasingly involve small-scale farmers in public food procurement:

Organise market engagement with small-scale farmers:

The ‘market dialogue’, also known as ‘market engagement’ ([Art 40](#). 2014 EU Directives on public procurement⁴), is a public engagement process that enables procurers to gain a better understanding of the food supply available in the market. Local and regional governments should organise such market consultations to establish communication with small-scale farmers and, thus, understand their capacity in terms of food supply, food requirements, costs, bureaucracy, and logistics.

The format of the ‘market dialogue’ varies according to the context and there is no established procedure to carry it out. However, market dialogues are particularly effective if they happen during the pre-procurement phase so that public authorities have the possibility to assess the obstacles that prevent small-scale farmers from participating in the public procurement tender. For instance, procurers during the market dialogue have the opportunity to test the readiness of small-scale farmers to supply sustainable products (e.g. organic food, delivery methods) as well as to communicate their short and long-term strategy for what concerns social and environmental goals. Accordingly, food suppliers can adapt their production methods to the tenders’ requirements, improving the sustainability of their businesses with positive outcomes for food system transformation.

It is important to note that, in order to be compliant with the EU public procurement law, the market engagement must be carried out without creating unfair advantages for individual food suppliers. Therefore, the principles of equal treatment, proportionality and transparency must be respected, and the sole purpose of the market dialogue must be limited to the exploration of the opportunities available on the market in order to make informed decisions and design inclusive tenders.

Implement strategies that enable the participation of small-scale farmers in the public tendering:

Local and regional governments are encouraged to implement the following strategies to involve small-scale farms in the public food procurement system:

- **Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS)** is a procurement method that aims to easily connect food supplied by small-scale farmers with public buyers through an online B2B (business to business) market platform. This method is flexible and meets the needs of small-scale farmers as well as contracting authorities. The small-scale farmers have the possibility to offer the amount of food they have available at any time via the online platform, setting the price themselves. The procurers can select and buy seasonal, fresh and high-quality products from short-food supply chains.

In 2013, the City of Ghent launched the urban food strategy ‘Ghent en Garde’ which is part of the city’s mission to become a climate-robust city by 2030 and climate-neutral by 2050. Fostering short food supply chains is a central focus of the Ghent food strategy and is reflected in the public food procurement strategy which aims to valorise local products purchased directly from farmers. In 2019, procurement authorities started to rely on a B2B online market platform called Vanier to purchase food for public canteens from short food supply chains. This method was tested on the occasion of the 2019 ‘Short Supply Chain Week’ and has been demonstrated to be successful in connecting public authorities with local SMEs and in enabling a mapping of the local suppliers. Besides, the menu proposal has been adapted to the availability of local products with excellent results in terms of quality since ‘delicacy’ products were purchased such as goat cheese, local mustard, farm butter, asparagus, etc. Given the success of this short supply chain procedure, the City of Ghent subsequently decided to issue a larger tender with a contract value of EUR 139.000 and decided to keep working on this food procurement method in the future.

- **Direct contracting below the threshold:** The EU regulation on public procurement applies above several 'threshold amounts' for different categories of products and services ([Art 4. 2014 EU Directives on public procurement](#)⁵). However, if a contract falls below the threshold set by the aforementioned Directive, the public purchasing process will not fall under the scope of the public procurement rules. Consequently, contracting authorities can buy small amounts of food, below the threshold value, directly from small-scale farmers. This is a concrete way to buy locally produced goods and support the development of territorial food systems.
- **Reserving contracts or lots for producers who employ disabled or disadvantaged workers:** The EU public procurement regulatory framework foresees the possibility to reserve a contract, or one or more lots of a contract to economic operators that employ at least 30% 'disabled or disadvantaged workers' ([Art 20. 2014 EU Directives on public procurement](#)⁴). Hence, contracts can be reserved to social cooperatives, sheltered workshops and/or small-scale farmers or farm workers with precarious income situations.

Invest in infrastructures to increase the number of on-site kitchens:

In Europe, many public canteens do not own a kitchen and therefore procurers are obliged to rely on private caterers to prepare the meals. Local and regional governments (LRGs) should invest in infrastructure development to ensure that all public canteens be linked to an *onsite* kitchen. This will enable procurers to buy food directly from small-scale farmers and utilise a chef to prepare sustainable and healthy meals onsite. Accordingly, LRGs can control, in a comprehensive way, the food sourcing and processing of public meals. In addition to increasing the quality of meals, this investment will boost public purchasing from short food supply chains, and support the development of territorial food systems, with their associated environmental, economic, public health and climate benefits.

Guarantee healthy and sustainable school meals and food education for every school child

The [European Child Guarantee](#)⁵ aims to ensure 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 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. Furthermore, investments in the provision of healthy and sustainable school meals will create savings in the healthcare system and will contribute to the personal wellbeing of future generations. Providing healthy and sustainable school meals can promote a shift towards healthy and sustainable diets, as encouraged by the [EU School fruit, vegetable and milk scheme](#). This scheme supports schools in the provision of healthy and sustainable food such as fresh fruit, vegetables and milk as well as 'educational measures'; farms visit included. The combination of school meals with food education and cooking classes in school curricula can further strengthen the link to regional food and culture and thus lead to more resilient and sustainable food systems.

Food education in schools has been demonstrated to be an effective measure to raise awareness among children about healthy and sustainable eating habits⁶. The implementation of the [Whole School Food Approach](#), developed in the context of the [SchoolFood4Change](#)⁷ project, can serve as a reference to implement a holistic approach to achieve a healthy and sustainable food culture in and around schools. The diagram below shows the four pillars that constitute this education method, namely, policy and leadership, food and sustainability, community and partnership and education and learning.



SchoolFood4Change project

Local and regional governments are strongly encouraged to promote this education method in the schools within the scope of the territories under their administration.

Furthermore, food education can be a vehicle to connect food sourcing with local producers since farm visits can be a requisite in the food tenders. Indeed, the procurer can add 'farm visits' as a requirement in the contract under 'light services'. Accordingly, if the farm that provides food for the canteen should also guarantee onsite visits to schoolchildren, this would limit the geographical area of the food sourcing since the farm should be reachable in a reasonable time. Therefore, linking educational activities in the farms with food procurement can be considered an effective strategy to procure food coming from the territory and from short food supply chains.

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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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