


## Editorial

# Public Food Procurement: A Transformative Instrument for Sustainable Food Systems

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Public food procurement policies and initiatives designed to use government purchasing power and regular demand for food have gained much global attention in the last decade [1,2]. Public food procurement policies can be used to promote healthy diets, based on sustainable food systems, in workplaces, schools, universities, hospitals, aged care facilities, and other venues at which public meals are provided. A key characteristic of public food procurement is that it offers the opportunity to determine the way food is procured in addition to what type of food is purchased (local, diverse, nutritious, healthy, culturally appropriate, etc.), from whom (smallholder farmers, small and medium food enterprises, women, youth, and/or other vulnerable groups), and from which type of production (from agroecology or organic or other modes of agricultural production that ensure environmental sustainability as well as biodiversity). In this Special Issue, we solicited a range of articles from academics, researchers, and practitioners exploring innovative approaches and methods in the field of sustainable public food procurement practice and policy, with a particular focus on the use of public food procurement policies as an instrument to promote environmental sustainability and possible means by which to measure its impacts, areas in which research is currently lacking.

This Special Issue comprises two academic literature reviews and three case studies—from Italy, Kenya, and South Africa.

Elvira Molin, Michael Martin, and Anna Björklund (Swedish Environmental Research Institute/KTH Royal Institute of Technology) report on a systematic literature review of sustainability within public procurement of food, examining 103 articles published between 2000 and 2020. In this review, they analysed what aspects of sustainability were emphasised and what practices were identified as sustainable. In many of the reviewed studies, procuring local food was assumed to be environmentally beneficial due to reduced food miles. However, certain studies have shown that food miles may not be a good proxy for environmental sustainability. Some procuring authorities were reluctant to buy from local producers because more established companies were perceived to be better suppliers. Several articles supported purchasing organic foods, which were promoted to address all three pillars of sustainability, although the motivations primarily focused on the environmental sustainability related to reduced environmental impacts. There were conflicting views in the literature as to whether increased usage of organic foods will reduce GHG emissions. Organic food was also sometimes promoted as healthier. Only a few of the reviewed articles suggested a reduction in meat usage as a sustainable food procurement approach. The review concludes that few articles assess the sustainability or outcomes of procurement processes through quantitative or qualitative methods or how actors in the procurement process can improve procurement toward more sustainable foods. The

authors declare that there is a need for further case studies and guidelines to measure the development, progress, and performance of public food procurement.

Goiuri Alberdi and Mirene Begiristain-Zubillaga of the University of the Basque Country report on a scoping review of sustainable food procurement strategy in healthcare systems. Online databases were used to identify scientific and grey literature published in English from 2000 to 2019. An analytical–synthetic approach was used for charting the data. In total, 26 studies were included, 65% of which were published in the last five years. These included research articles (n 11), an opinion article (n 1), policy handbooks and guides (n 2), project reports (n 4), technical reports (n 3), policy forums (n 1), factsheet documents (n 3), and legislative directives (n 1). The outcomes framework highlighted multilevel governance, a sustainable food supply system, and healthy and sustainable food services as the main action areas for a sustainable food procurement strategy, along with six transversal features: long-term commitment, investment, evaluation, communication, gender, and a holistic approach.

Elena Pagliarino, Elena Santanera, and Greta Falavigna of the Italian Research Institute on Sustainable Economic Growth discuss a case study of an Italian school where researchers examined the extent to which parents were willing to participate in food procurement decisions, as well as their ability to predict what foods children would pick at school lunch and their willingness to support sustainable food choices made by the school. Their research is based on a questionnaire survey of 500 parents, and an in-depth study of 138 child–parent pairs. The study comprised (i) presentation of an innovative recipe in the weekly menu of the school canteen, (ii) meal observations of children’s intake at school lunch during the week of the menu modification, and (iii) collection of the reports of both parents and children on their choices of dishes from the modified weekly menu. The study assesses the impact of two recent changes in Italian school canteen policy—the opening of school canteens to lunches brought from home and measures adopted to contain the COVID pandemic. It concludes that these changes have had a detrimental effect on the quality of food eaten in Italian school canteens.

Clement Mensah and Abdulrazak Karriem of the Institute for Social Development at the University of the Western Cape made a qualitative assessment of the contribution to sustainable rural livelihoods made by the South African National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). Using in-depth interviews, they explored the contributions and challenges of using local farmers as suppliers, within the Eastern Cape, the country’s poorest province. The study found that participating schools in rural areas benefit from local sourcing of fresh vegetables for school meals. This was facilitated by the utilisation of a decentralised catering model. There was some evidence of farmers earning additional income and expanding vegetable production. However, while schools were encouraged to buy vegetables grown locally, they retained discretion to buy from other suppliers. Their study concluded that there was scope for a greater effort to source school food ingredients from local farmers. This could use NSNP as a tool to make the South African food system more inclusive, drive down rural poverty and realise sustainable rural development.

Julian Xie, Kathrin Demmler, Ann Trevenen-Jones, and Kelly Brownell are four researchers based in the USA and Switzerland who have studied urban public food provision in the Kiambu and Machakos counties of Kenya, examining an early childhood education centre and primary school feeding, hospital food provision, and COVID-19 responses. Their research revealed that actionable data and public–private partnerships were enabling factors. Multistakeholder involvement and governance increased coordination. However, budget constraints threatened programme stability. Procurement criteria focused on nutrition, food quality, and community development but did not explicitly include environmental sustainability. The paper concluded that, by developing public food procurement, urban governments in low- and middle-income countries can reach the most vulnerable whilst improving farmer livelihoods and addressing environmental concerns.

The various articles amassed in this Special Issue show the multiple potentials and multi-faceted nature of public food procurement policies and initiatives. In line with in-

creasing international recognition, including by the recent United Nations Food Systems Summit, these case studies from African and European countries highlight how public food procurement is a transversal policy instrument with the potential to be used in very different country contexts to achieve various development objectives, including environmental sustainability.

In addition to providing evidence on the potential benefits of PFP, the articles presented in this Special Issues also show the complexity of these initiatives and provide insights on the issues arising and possible areas of interventions needed for proper implementation.

All of the contributions are unanimous in highlighting the need for further research and case studies. We hope that this Special Issue contributes to filling this gap and promoting further research in this area.

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