

Increasing action on sustainable and healthy school food procurement in the EU

Recommendations for national and EU policy makers



All children and young people go to school. It is the place where they usually spend most of their time. They need good food to grow, concentrate and stay healthy. They also have the right to healthy, adequate, safe, and sustainably produced food and good health in order to reach their full potential. However, despite favourable EU Procurement legislation, an EU school fruit, vegetables and milk scheme and numerous supportive studies and policies as well as a growing number of good practices, most European schools base their purchasing decisions on the cheapest price only, leaving limited margin for environmental and social sustainability.

Also, today's food systems account for 21–37% of total greenhouse gases (IPCCC, 2019) and are a primary cause of environmental degradation, socio-economic and health inequalities. Still, governments of all levels rarely link food systems, and in particular food

consumption emissions, to their climate action targets (e.g. nationally determined contributions on climate).

The current [EU Farm to Fork Strategy](#) offers an extraordinary opportunity to recognise and enhance the positive role public food procurement can play in supporting a food systems transition.

Based on the views and experiences of a number of local and national experts, the policy advocacy work of the [EU Food Policy Council](#) and further research, we present the following eight recommendations to the European Commission and EU Member State governments in support of the EU Farm to Fork Strategy and the United Nations [Sustainable Development Goals](#). These recommendations have been prepared as part of the [Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme](#) funded [StratKIT](#) project with [ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability](#) as the main author.

1. Establish a favourable policy framework

Policy makers must be made aware of how much the agri-food sector impacts on environmental degradation, how it is driving the current climate and health crisis, and that public procurement is a vehicle for significant change of the EU's food systems. Research data must be provided to policy makers in a strategically targeted way so they develop an understanding of why there is an acute need to change unsustainable procurement practices of school food.

- Research should be done nationally to uncover what kind of food, in terms of sustainability and health quality, is being provided to children in schools (day cares, kindergartens, primary and secondary schools). What are the healthcare costs borne by governments and society from the consumption of poor quality food, at large scale, by our future adults?
- Failure of not having a robust policy framework (serving the public interest) needed for sustainable procurement is that lowest price becomes the sole criterion for awarding public food/ catering contracts. Furthermore, the inclusion of sustainability considerations in public procurement procedures can be viewed as discriminatory (or disproportional) by the market if this is not done as part of implementing a clear and wide-reaching sustainable and healthy food policy. For example, a public food procurement policy, which aims for specific reductions in CO₂ emissions produced by transportation, would justify the requirement of food from a short supply chain.

2. Integrate national health/nutrition dietary guidelines

- National guidelines should be at the heart of setting ambitious goals for sustainable and health public school food procurement. Member States should regularly evaluate and update their guidelines based on independent expertise, to progressively include sustainability dimensions alongside nutritional recommendations (for instance in the recent case of Denmark). EU Member States and the European Commission

should also consider ways to harmonise the basic features of such guidelines, while also considering national and regional food cultures and trends in population nutrition.

- Integration also calls for strengthening current forms of multi-level governance. That is national, regional and local governments working together vertically and strategically to provide healthy food (for people and planet).

3. Create minimum mandatory public procurement criteria for school food embracing sustainability and health

- Minimum mandatory food procurement criteria must consider social, health and sustainability concerns. By promoting more organic and sustainably grown food and ensuring alignment with recommendations for healthy and sustainable diets, they should aim to achieve multiple policy objectives with one tool, emphasising the co-benefits of a sustainable food systems transition.
- Set requirements that promote organic, sustainably grown food, ensuring alignment with up to date national health and nutrition guidelines, to enable the achievement of multiple policy objectives with one tool.
- Criteria must be ambitious, but progressive. They must take into consideration national or regional food systems, in particular food production, to avoid creating negative market distortions, but rather achieve climate friendly, sustainable and nutrition-sensitive food production across EU Member States.
- An increasing number of countries have mandatory requirements for including sustainability considerations into public procurement (of food). Capturing and building on the experiences of what is working and not working when setting mandatory requirements is key. Monitoring is crucial for continuous success.

4. Restructure public procurement to create and maximise synergies

- Centralising expertise and knowledge on sustainable public procurement proves to support its operationalisation. This is especially the case among less experienced public administrations. Setting up a specialised unit on sustainable procurement to support smaller purchasing units can help bridge information and awareness gaps.
- Rethinking and potentially restructuring school food procurement procedures to a central unit can maximise synergies in terms of health and sustainability impacts, and in terms of economic resources.

5. Foster cooperation from farm to fork with and among small-scale farmers and social economy enterprises

- In line with EU work to promote social economy enterprises, it is central that public procurement recognises the role of social economy and cooperatives as suppliers for sustainable food.
- A well-organised procurement/demand side requires a just as well organised supply side (such as consortiums of suppliers/producers). National governments must also implement policies that support sustainable farming practices, while reducing support for resource intensive agriculture. Providing incentives that support and build capacities, including of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), to deliver sustainable food is essential.

6. Boost local and regional development through sustainable and healthy food procurement

- Promoting the consumption of food and food products from a short supply chain can contribute to a wider range of policy objectives for regional and urban development. These include:

- food system resilience,
 - encourage participation from small-scale farmers and SMEs,
 - food transformation local entrepreneurs and job creation,
 - education on healthy and sustainable diets among consumers and among children, and
 - bridging the rural-urban gap.
- It is crucial that school food procurement actions that open opportunities for local or regional produce form part of a related broad and coherent strategy for reducing the carbon footprint of products purchased by the government authority.

7. Encourage and enable education about food systems and healthy diets to be included in school curricula

- The increased availability and accessibility of healthy food is not enough for a societal shift to sustainable healthy diets to happen. Food provision and healthy diets must be embedded into a supportive food culture environment that embraces all actors along the food system chain to thus ensure lasting systemic change.
- Creating sustainable healthy school food environments requires an enabling educational environment where children learn about where their food comes from, eating and sharing meals together, and the critical interconnections between sustainability, circularity and health. For instance, using schools themselves as places for food production, which serve both educational, and consumption aspects.
- Schools and children have the potential to be change agents in the transformation to sustainable food systems. Governments (local, regional and national) are not only well placed but have the responsibility for the quality of the school environment and school meals in most EU countries, and for developing educational curricula.

8. Channel resources to help bridge gaps

- The EU and national governments should provide financial and technical support (training) to local and regional governments for a more strategic use of school food procurement in line with national and local sustainable and healthy food strategies and objectives.
- Resources and investments made into training of food preparation professionals on climate friendly, nutritionally healthy and good tasting food suitable for children.
- Resources must be directed to undertaking more research and communication actions targeting policy makers to help them understand how local food systems (i.e. urban metabolism) and local enabling factors (such as public procurement) interact and influence our food systems.
- Trustworthy reliable (regularly updated) sources of information for procurers and producers must also be made available nationally.





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