

# SCHOOLFOOD4CHANGE POLICY-OPPORTUNITY BRIEF

## SCHOOL MEALS AS A POLICY AREA WITH HUGE POTENTIAL



Based on a country-level mapping done in 12 countries in Europe who all participate in the SchoolFood4Change project, this brief summarises and gives a global and cross-European overview of common barriers and challenges when it comes to achieving sustainable and healthy food systems, zooming in on school meals and focusing on children and youth. At the same time, it captures a selection of interconnected action areas and opportunities for policy development. These areas need to be addressed at both the European Union level as well as at national, regional and local level, in the purpose of taking a system approach and shifting school meals, unlocking their true potential.

### Introduction to SchoolFood4Change

SchoolFood4Change is an EU-funded project, co-created by a consortium of 43 European partners, including environmental and non-governmental organisations, local governments, schools, research institutes, meal professionals and health experts. Together, we aim at making school meals enjoyable and healthy for both our children and our planet by integrating a whole school food approach and implementing food education in everyday school life. We are also implementing sustainable food procurement through innovative criteria and healthy and sustainable menus through the training and empowerment of school chefs.

### What is the problem and what do we want?

Multiple global crises, including an increasingly warmer world, rising food prices as well as (child) poverty are severe threats to global food security (see appendix). Recent analyses have shown that neither climate, biodiversity, public health action, nor efforts to eradicate child poverty are moving nearly fast enough to align with globally set targets, goals and ambitions.

Collectively, we need to realise the potential and necessity of urgently **accelerating implementation of possible solutions**, shifting school meals and food environments for children, a vulnerable group, into a new paradigm. Providing all children with access to at least one healthy and sustainable meal each school day, thereby promoting their health and ensuring equal educational opportunities is one of the main pillars of the European Child Guarantee – an EU Council regulation since 2021<sup>1</sup>. School food programmes create the incredible potential to expose children to nutritious, sustainable, regional and delicious meals from early on, enabling them to become change agents and to carry the message into their homes. **Acting now is crucial.**



**It's time for  
a new menu**

<sup>1</sup> On 14 June 2021 an EU Council Regulation was adopted: Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/>

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### POLICY-OPPORTUNITIES TO SEIZE BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION:

Children must be recognised as agents of change. They are a vulnerable group, with children in need at high risk of exclusion from decision making processes and are often left out as a key target group for policies. The key asks of the **EU Child Guarantee** must form part of present and future development of food-related policies to be implemented within the European Union.

1. Mainstream and include food education and schools as well as school restaurants as enabling food environments in upcoming policy developments relating to food system transformation and the revision of the **EU School Scheme**.
2. Consider and include training and upskilling of school chefs and meal staff as crucial contributions to the green transition building on experiences from the **2023 European Year of Skills** and **Pact for Skills** as well as any policy development relating to transformation of food systems for increased sustainability.
3. Create and legislate minimum **mandatory sustainable public procurement criteria** for school food and reform/simplify the **EU Public Procurement Law** to boost local and regional development.

The SchoolFood4Change consortium is therefore calling for the prioritisation of three interconnected and decisive action areas when reviewing and developing the European Green Deal legislation and any upcoming policy processes relating to sustainable food systems:

1. Implement and standardise **food education**;
2. enable schools to provide **sustainable food and food environments for the well-being of people and our planet**;
3. use the power of **sustainable public food procurement**.

Commonly, they all require collaboration and action at multiple levels, during and beyond the SchoolFood4Change project period. These areas will be central to unlocking the true potential of school food and schools per se.



## POINTS OF CONSIDERATION FOR THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION WOULD BE TO

mainstream and include food education in schools, as well as school restaurants as enabling positive food environments in:

- ▶ the GREEN DEAL LEGISLATION RELATED TO SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS.
- ▶ the EU SCHOOL SCHEME, where holistic food education and the FAO approach (mentioned here) should be further developed to strengthen school scheme investments.

Future policies should also oblige member states to develop national plans or strategies for sustainable food systems that include food education and enabling, positive food environments.



## What needs to be done?

1. Add the ingredients 'food' and 'education' to all schools to accelerate change

An ingredient that has been long missing in the worlds' school meals programmes as well as in local and national strategies is mandatory and integrated food education in schools. Cities and actors across the European SchoolFood4Change network are united in the policy wish to bring food education into schools and make lunch time an integrated part of the pedagogic mission. Today, this is close to non-existing on a systematic level. One of the most frequently mentioned barriers is the lack of recognition or prioritization by national or federal education governance when it comes to including school meals as part of their mission or responsibility. Consequently, they struggle to perceive the connection between school meals and educational benefits or values. However, the hard truth stands firm: "A hungry child cannot learn". Good school food is best accompanied by food and nutrition education that is well integrated into the curriculum, savored and learned in an enjoyable school food environment. These two components implemented separately can have a positive effect on children and adolescents' eating habits and diet outcomes; however, when implemented together, their impact increases even more and concretely influence the eating behaviours of children and adolescents.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is advocating school-based food and nutrition education (SFNE)<sup>2</sup>, an action-oriented and school-based approach that foresees opportunities for direct experience and practices in real-life settings such as school gardens, farmers visits to the school or vice versa, food markets, etc. This approach advises to involve the whole person: the head (knowledge and understanding), the heart (motivation) and the hands (practice and skills); and promote the interaction with the social and physical food environments. FAO also promotes a 'whole school' approach to SFNE, actively involving all people that interact in the school setting, including children, their families, teachers, school staff, local farmers, foodservice staff, food vendors, and government staff. There is also a lot of intercultural potential to take advantage of the school canteen as a pleasant food environment. Imagine it being perceived as a school 'restaurant'! The added intercultural value lies both in the school meals on the plates (different dishes, flavours, traditions) and in the social interaction between the school's staff and students from possible different backgrounds.

Looking outside the premises of the school, zoning is a policy instrument within the mandate of urban planners and local governments that can be used to create more enabling food environments around schools<sup>3</sup>. The goal is to have 'food competent' children, adolescents, families and communities that are well prepared to take responsibility for their own health and for the future of our planet. Over the course of a child's schooling, lunch hour makes up thousands of opportunities to learn something. Either we waste it, or we use it!

<sup>2</sup> Food and nutrition education | School Food and Nutrition | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations ([fao.org](http://fao.org))

<sup>3</sup> Ilieva, R., Urban Food Planning - Seeds of transition in the global north. Routledge, 2019



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include the training and upskilling of school chefs and meal staff as crucial contributions to the green transition:

- ▶ building on experiences from the 2023 EUROPEAN YEAR OF SKILLS and PACT FOR SKILLS as an opportunity to promote and enable investments to upskill chefs in order to contribute to a green transition, sustainable food consumption and shifting demands for climate and environmentally friendly food.
- ▶ in any policy development relating to transformation of food systems for increased sustainability.



## 2. Make sure schools and school chefs have the utensils and recipes they need. That is, knowledge and training they need to source, cook and serve sustainable food

A diet that includes more plant-based foods and fewer animal-based foods is a 'win-win' situation, high on human health benefits and low on environmental impacts<sup>4</sup>. It is not a question of all or nothing, but rather small changes for a large and positive impact. In fact, when it comes to consumption of food and sustainability, we need to move beyond the what, and instead focus on how to implement the next steps.

Chefs and other culinary professionals are well-positioned to make healthy and sustainable foods delicious by applying unique insights, culinary techniques, skills and creativity. Making the most sustainable choice the tastiest, most appealing and thus easiest option is critical to bringing children and youth along on a journey of discovery and adoption of sustainable school meals. A skilled professional can adapt menus to local geography and culinary traditions at the same time as managing their guests' preferences which is instrumental in minimising food waste. Public chefs can have tremendous leverage with both food suppliers and young consumers, nudging them into shifting their diets through school restaurants being the positive food environments that are lacking today.

Local, regional and national governments can drive the demand for sustainable foods and send clear market signals by empowering, supporting and training chefs and canteen staff. This support can be given by providing political programmes, policies and guidelines that enable a shift towards more sustainable diets, handing over mandate, budget and possibility to source, cook and serve sustainable school meals. Actions like these will have ripple effects all the way through the food value chain back to the farmers.

Moreover, shifting menus into becoming more sustainable and healthier go increasingly hand in hand with the economic challenges and restricted budgets local governments face and even becomes more affordable and profitable<sup>5,6</sup>, if done in a thought-out way. Being climate-smart when planning the menu, letting plants and vegetables take centre stage while cutting down on animal-based foods, taking seasonality into consideration and including food waste preventive measures can result in cost savings, not only to stay within budget but even providing room for higher quality foodstuff, like organic or other certified produce.

4 Willett, W., Rockström, J., Loken, B., Springmann, M., Lang, T., Vermeulen, S., et al. Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT-Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems. *The Lancet Commissions* 2019;10170, p447-492

5 Springmann, M., Clark, M.A., Rayner, M., Scarborough, P., Webb P. The global and regional costs of healthy and sustainable dietary patterns: a modelling study. *Lancet Planet Health* 2021;5: e797–807.

6 Schäfer Elinder, L., Eustachio Colombo, P., Patterson, E., Parlesak, A., Lindroos, A K., Successful Implementation of Climate-Friendly, Nutritious, and Acceptable School Meals in Practice: The OPTIMAT™ Intervention Study. *Sustainability* 2020, 12(20), 8475



## POINTS OF CONSIDERATION FOR THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION WOULD BE TO

- ▶ set up and implement MINIMUM MANDATORY PUBLIC PROCUREMENT CRITERIA for school food embracing both environmental sustainability and health, which support the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- ▶ promote local and regional development by reforming the EU PUBLIC PROCUREMENT LAW, to make it easier for member states to procure sustainable food with short supply chains, local small-scale food producers, and farmers committed to produce food using sustainable methods of production such as organic farming.

On the other hand, promoting the consumption of food with a short supply chain and farmers that engage into sustainable methods of production such as organic farming can contribute to a wider range of policy objectives for regional and urban development. These include:

- food system resilience and food security,
- encourage participation from small-scale and organic farmers and SMEs in procurement processes,
- job creation and boosting local economies,
- creation of a stable market for local, small-scale and organic farmers who would have certainty to sell their products,
- practical and place-based education on healthy and sustainable diets among consumers and among children, including food culture and traditions, and
- bridging the rural-urban gap

Nonetheless, local and regional governments need a European framework as well as national ones to provide support and guidance for the implementation of resilient regional food systems. Both enabling policies and mandatory requirements need to be in place to support sustainable public food procurement, more resilient city-regions and food regions.

### 3. Make it easier for individual EU-member states to procure sustainable food from local (or short-supply chain), small-scale and organic food producers.

In Europe, local and regional public authorities play a key role in the implementation of sustainable food systems, and they have the mandate to procure food or catering services for their institutions, such as schools, daycares, hospitals, etc. Not only do they command the budgets, and thus have the power to exert market pressure and drive demand, they have the responsibility to be exemplary in how they spend public money.

Sustainable public procurement involves looking beyond short-term needs and considering the longer-term impacts of each purchase. Sustainable food procurement criteria must consider societal aspects including health, economic and sustainability concerns. By promoting more organic and sustainably grown food and ensuring alignment with recommendations for healthy and sustainable diets<sup>7</sup>, sustainable public procurement should aim to achieve multiple policy objectives, emphasising the co-benefits of a sustainable food systems transition.

However, the current European Procurement Directives do not address health and sustainability criteria directly but rather treat food as any other goods or service. In most cases this means that price-efficiency often remains the main priority and non-discriminatory practices are mandatory, which make it difficult to source locally and establish territorial links. In essence, having the intention to procure locally means risking breaking the law. With different EU member states having their own national procurement regulations, structures, standards and practices, it also results in a highly scattered and fractured landscape on public food procurement and the quality of food offered. Similarly, even if the current legislation allows public procurers to demand specifically organic products in tenders, a lot of technical and financial barriers remain and need to be addressed.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Sustainable healthy diets: guiding principles ([who.int](http://who.int))





# CONCLUSIONS



The importance of transforming our food system is recognised in a wide range of recent EU initiatives such as the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies, the legislation on deforestation, the upcoming nature restoration law, the sustainable use of pesticides regulation and the debated EU Sustainable Food Systems Framework Law. Initiatives also emerge in the global level, like the Biodiversity COP15 manifesto. Rather than seeing school meals as an administrative and financial burden at national and local level, we should use the provision of school food as a tool to improve our current food system, and see it as great opportunity to path the way to build a resilient, sustainable food systems that ensures long-term food security. The transformation is already ongoing with many companies in the food supply chain ready and willing to act and supply the school food stakeholders with more sustainable offers. Now decisionmakers on all levels must create enabling and ambitious conditions to make school meals enjoyable and healthy for both our children and our planet.

Since school food has the potential to reach every school-aged child in Europe, it thus becomes one of the central long-term solutions to the complex food system challenges we are facing. But we cannot do this without policy makers that champion enabling policies. Let innovation and demand guide the way forward, both when it comes to practical solutions as well as business models and communication strategies.

**We now set out with the aim of shifting school meals into becoming healthier and more sustainable for the future of our children and our planet.**

**THANKS FOR  
THE FOOD!**

—————→  
**It's time for  
a new menu**

**For more information:**

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101036763.



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# APPENDIX

## What you should know about food systems and their link to sustainable school meals

The food we eat, the ways we produce it, and the amounts wasted or lost have major impacts on human health and environmental sustainability. This is one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century. Getting it right with food whilst also providing a growing global population with enough nutritious food will be an important gatekeeper for both countries and cities to achieve the targets of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on climate change.

### Global and European food system challenges

- The global food system causes around 30% of greenhouse gas emissions, is responsible for 70% of freshwater withdrawals, and is the leading cause of biodiversity loss through unsustainable food production methods and habitat loss.<sup>12</sup>
- In Europe and other developed regions, unhealthy diets have become an important risk factor for several non-communicable diseases and overweight and obesity is identified as a serious public health challenge, causing disabilities and death. Once it concerns children it is also likely to endure into adulthood.<sup>3</sup>
- One in three children living in the EU today suffer from overweight or obesity. According to the WHO, childhood obesity rates will seriously affect future generations' quality of life and average lifespans. Obesity is among the leading causes of death and disability in Europe.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, when it comes to preventing health issues and encouraging

1 Environmental Impacts of Food Production - Our World in Data

2 Bending the Curve: The Restorative Power of Planet-Based Diets | Publications | WWF (worldwildlife.org)

3 WHO warns of worsening obesity 'epidemic' in Europe | UN News

4 These facts have led to the adoption of the Zagreb Declaration on 11 May 2023 – a document formally extending political support for combating the problem of childhood obesity in Europe, and also a decision to set up a dedicated European centre to help fight obesity on the continent. <https://www.who.int>

sustainable eating habits, a particular focus should be on children, in whom small changes can lead to larger and long-term impacts.<sup>5</sup>

### Improvements to be made

- Shifting to healthier diets within planetary boundaries could reduce greenhouse gas emissions from food by at least 30%, wildlife loss by 46%, agricultural land use by 41% and premature deaths by 20%.<sup>6</sup>
- School meals shape the dietary habits of children for years to come. If children are served and fed nutritious and sustainable food at school, and if school meals are accompanied by integrated food education grounded in authentic learning, they can have a transformative impact on both public health, substantially reducing greenhouse gas emissions, reaching the Paris agreement as well as the achievement of the global sustainability goals.<sup>7</sup>
- Today, integrated and standardized food education is close to non-existing in European countries on a systematic level. National or federal governance for education usually don't have school meals as a part of their responsibility and thus have a hard time to see the linkage between food and educational benefits, values or life-long skills.
- Although the potential and ambition are clearly there, local and regional governments struggle to support small and medium sized food producers as well as incorporating sustainability criteria when sourcing school meals or its ingredients. They are often overshadowed by the European framework for public procurement and the structure of large-scale tenders and administrative structures. In essence, deliberately procuring locally sourced foods today means breaking the law!

5 WHO European Regional Obesity Report 2022

6 Planet-Based Diets | WWF (panda.org)

7 Healthy and sustainable food pathways for schoolchildren (fao.org)

# APPENDIX

## Existing structures of school meals to leverage a change

- The global annual investment of €44.5 billion in school meal programmes creates a huge and predictable market for food and offers an extraordinary opportunity to transform food systems and diets, and to respond proactively to the global food challenges.<sup>8</sup>
- School meals are cost-effective and cost-beneficial because of the return of investment across multiple sectors. The single intervention of school feeding can have effects across at least four different sectors: agriculture, education, health and nutrition, and social protection, with approximately eight euro in return for every one euro invested. School feeding programmes that procure food locally can offer additional benefits for smallholder farmers, supporting local food production and economies, and promoting sustainable local markets for diverse, nutritious foods. School meals also serve as an important safety net, supporting families' food security and food affordability.<sup>9</sup>
- To put it straight: school meals could do more than provide food. The provision of sustainable school food, and the system behind it can support local agriculture and sustainable food markets (in both rural and urban areas) while simultaneously improving health, nutrition and education, making communities, cities and countries more resilient.

8 (converged from the original reference of US\$48 billion)  
The State of School Feeding Worldwide 2022 | World Food Programme (wfp.org)

9 (conversion to Euros per June 2023 based on the original reference of "USD 9 in return for every 1 USD invested")  
Investment Case for School Health and Nutrition\_Memo 4.pdf, School Meals Coalition, 2022

