

## School food procurement as a lever for economic resilience, environmental sustainability, and public health

Public procurement of food and catering services, for institutions like schools, is not merely a technical process but a **strategic policy tool** that governments and local authorities can use to drive economic development, environmental sustainability, innovation, and social impact. In the school year 2022/2023, meal programmes in the EU reached around **25 million children annually**<sup>1</sup>, demonstrating the tremendous potential that providing healthier and more sustainable meals at this scale has to improve public health, reduce environmental impacts, and generate economic benefits through more resilient and sustainable food systems. By promoting more organic food and ensuring alignment with recommendations for healthy diets (planetary health diets from the EAT-Lancet), sustainable public procurement (SPP) should aim to achieve **multiple policy objectives**, emphasising the co-benefits of a **transition to fair, sustainable and resilient food systems**.

### KEY MESSAGES:

- ★ The future of procurement policy lies in reinforcing public procurement's role as a lever for economic resilience, environmental sustainability, and public health.
- ★ Transition from voluntary sustainability criteria to legally binding ones, ensuring that the public food procurement budget aligns with the public interest.
- ★ Support market engagement, innovative procurement practices and invest in monitoring and evaluating procurement processes.
- ★ Scale up proven and effective (local) models, where successful experiences demonstrate that systemic change is possible through strategic procurement, supplier engagement, and the right regulatory frameworks at the local and EU levels. These models should be rolled out further and transformed into structural policies.

This brief gives an overview of **key barriers and challenges** and **captures the interconnected action areas and opportunities for policy development**. These areas require addressing at the EU level as well as at national, regional and local levels of government, making full use of multilevel governance, taking an integrated whole-system approach, and enabling school meal programmes to realise their full potential as drivers of food system transformation.

Additionally, this brief will show that healthy, sustainable food procurement is already a reality across Europe, with public buyers (e.g. cities and towns) demonstrating its numerous benefits daily. Within the [SchoolFood4Change](#) project, **16 cities and regions, and two national school networks**, have shown that their school food procurement approaches deliver on several social and sustainability objectives.



## Key challenges and barriers

### 1. Multi-level governance

SPP<sup>2</sup> in the EU continues to face important challenges and barriers, including unevenly defined targets and priorities across national, regional, and municipal levels, as well as limited coordination between different levels of decision-making. While some Member States - such as France and Italy - have established frameworks and targets for sustainable procurement, implementation remains fragmented across the EU, with significant variation in ambition, capacity, and enforcement.

Local and regional governments play a key role in the transformation to a sustainable food system, as they have the mandate to procure food or catering services for their institutions/ bodies, such as schools. They command the budgets and thus have the responsibility to be exemplary in how they spend taxpayers' money. Nonetheless, local and regional governments need support (with the integration of new competences for public procurers), guidance, and the correct legislative framework from national governments and the EU to progress towards resilient and sustainable territorial food systems. Vertical cooperation between different governance levels, as well as cross-departmental coordination from health, agriculture, procurement, education, environment, and social welfare are crucial.



### 2. Increasing the share of organic, local products and inclusion of small-scale

Another key challenge of SPP is to increase the environmental sustainability of food purchasing action, while at the same time supporting local economies and small-scale farmers. Increasing the share of organic products can come with the challenge of higher costs and difficulty in finding suppliers. Specific recommendations for cities that would like to increase their share of organic food in their public canteens can be found in the policy handout on [the SchoolFood4Change website](#). At the same time, the complex, often digital-based contracting and bidding systems between public procurers and producers or service providers are difficult for farmers to navigate. The administrative burden of bidding for and managing contracts is a common barrier for (small) farmers to participate in public procurement, as they often lack the time, capacity and scale of production required under the current system.

### 3. Additional school food priorities and challenges

Through consultations with SchoolFood4Change cities and regions, further challenges emerged, such as how to increase plant-based and vegetarian options in meals provided, implementing strategies for measuring and monitoring food loss and waste, and ensuring universal access to school meals, leaving no child behind.

## Action areas and recommendations for policymakers

A number of interconnected action areas and opportunities for policy development follow:

### #1 Strengthen governance and an overarching food strategy at national and EU levels that recognises public food procurement as a strategic lever to achieve health and sustainability goals of the EU.

The EU should support the co-creation of an EU-wide, national, regional, and local food strategy that ties together climate, sustainability, and health objectives, with dedicated sections on food procurement and action plans to achieve these goals. Making food procurement sustainable should not only be allowed, but rather encouraged, as also mentioned in the [EU Vision for Agriculture and Food 2025](#), which states “provide incentives to promote the consumption of local, seasonal products, and food produced with high environmental and social standards, including organic products and food originating from shorter supply chains”.

### #2 Transition from voluntary sustainability criteria to legally binding ones, ensuring that procurement aligns with measurable environmental and social outcomes.

The Revision of the EU 2014 Public Procurement Directives, taking place in 2026, should include mandatory standards (such as those listed in the EU Food Policy Coalition’s [Manifesto for Minimum Mandatory Criteria](#)) that go beyond the [EU Green Public Procurement guidelines](#), or alternatively enable such standards to be established through sector-specific legislation. The [2014/24 EU Procurement Directive](#) aimed to balance internal market strength with social and environmental goals through procurement. However, evidence suggests it has not effectively encouraged strategic and sustainable procurement. The sustainability principle enshrined in article 18 of the directive lacks clear implementation and enforcement. Socially responsible public procurement faces legal uncertainties, and despite new options, public buyers (contracting authorities) tend to stick to traditional award methods such as ‘lowest price’, hindering sustainability objectives due to risk aversion.

The experiences shown in SchoolFood4Change demonstrate that it is important to push for minimum mandatory standards for public food procurement, including strong recommendations for more innovative procurement approaches to increase the share of regionally sourced food (that is, short supply chains), for example, by dividing tenders into smaller lots and incorporating award criteria that prioritise freshness and seasonality. This means investing in local and regional food systems, reducing reliance on globalised supply chains that prioritise cost reduction over sustainability and resilience.



### #3 Support market engagement and innovative procurement practices.

Market dialogues - in the pre-tendering or procurement phase - are essential for sustainable food procurement as they foster communication between procurers and suppliers, leading to a better understanding of the challenges faced by the different actors but also of the market (food available), more effective tenders, and a more sustainable food system. These crucial steps allow public buyers (e.g. local governments) to discuss potential solutions with the market (producers, wholesalers, caterers, etc), foresee and reduce possible problems and expenses, give bidders enough time to prepare their offers, and boost the involvement of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), including small-scale farmers, in the bidding process. To facilitate this, clarification through the revised directive should provide greater clarity and legal certainty about these types of pre-procurement consultations, so that public buyers can confidently engage in these practices.

Additionally, the EU should support the strengthening of public procurement networks to facilitate knowledge sharing and capacity-building among EU member states and local governments, for example, by providing study trips for knowledge exchange. While [the Public Buyers Community Platform](#) (initiated by the Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs) already provides a general space for exchange, it has not been specifically tailored to the complex needs of sustainable food procurement. Collaboration across public procurement networks can support the adoption of best practices in sustainable food procurement, whether for contracting food service providers or purchasing food directly.

SchoolFood4Change partners also deem investment in training programmes as essential to equip procurement officers with practical tools to implement sustainable purchasing strategies effectively. This includes fostering strong collaboration between procurement officers, caterers, nutritionists, and users (such as families). Without clear sustainability requirements embedded in menus and food service contracts, sustainable food will not be procured. A multidisciplinary approach - integrating procurement expertise with nutritional and culinary know-how - is vital to ensure that public food services align with sustainability and health objectives.

### #4 Invest in monitoring and evaluation.

To ensure credible monitoring and verification of social and environmental requirements, it is crucial to establish clear and robust criteria for compliance monitoring, including social audits, labels, and certifications, and the capacity for inspections.

Supporting procurers in their search to find sustainable products by creating a European product database (TRACES – but more in depth) and allocating funding to support national interfaces for such a database. A product database should allow a procurer to find specific products and suppliers that meet specific sustainable criteria.

## #5 Support the revision of the EU School Scheme.

The revised [EU School Scheme](#) should be accessible to promote unprocessed, organic – and if available – locally grown food, in line with national dietary guidelines, and continue to support food and nutrition education activities in schools. It should complement their sustainable school food purchases. Moreover, increasing or securing the financial investment in the EU School Scheme is also needed. The revised scheme should - in addition - serve to strengthen educational measures regarding food (food origins, healthy diets, nutrition, cooking skills, etc.), including supporting the links from schools to farms/farmers, and contribute to closing the gap in generational renewal in agriculture. Finally, sustainability of food products packaging should also be considered. At the same time, schools are able to guarantee a scheduled demand, giving more certainty to local producers.

## #6 The EU institutions should lead by example as a sustainable food procurer.

The [European Parliament exceeded its Green Public Procurement target](#), with 96.6% of contracts in priority categories classified as either 'Green' or 'Green by Nature' (requiring products to meet certain ecological standards and/or favouring products that have recognised environmental certifications). Additionally, the Parliament has introduced guidelines for incorporating social responsibility aspects. We advocate prioritising and implementing this approach across all EU institutions.

### SchoolFood4Change targets for Sustainable Public Procurement

SchoolFood4Change has developed and implemented a Triple Impact Approach around three pillars: 1) implementing innovative and sustainable food procurement practices, 2) the promotion of Planetary Health Diets and cooking in schools, and 3) introducing and putting into practice a "Whole School Food Approach". The latter is an implementation framework for local governments and schools for achieving a pupil-friendly food culture in and around schools engaging all related actors.

Within the pillar on sustainable food procurement, SchoolFood4Change has set out seven innovative targets towards more sustainable food procurement models<sup>3</sup>. The criteria have been designed together with procurers, nutritionists, city representatives, schools, food scholars, and lawyers to deliver sustainable food in schools within the EU public procurement framework<sup>4</sup>. The targets address various facets of food systems, including organic food production, circular and fair economy, waste reduction, and better education and infrastructure for healthy and sustainable diets. They also clearly demonstrate the importance of inclusive, multilevel governance and market dialogues.

Seven innovative targets towards more sustainable food procurement models:

1. Organic production and biodiversity protection
2. Nutrition, quality, taste, freshness and seasonality
3. Greenhouse gas emissions reductions
4. Reduction of food poverty
5. Food education, food culture, culinary traditions
6. Small farmers and social integration of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups
7. Fairtrade and decent labour conditions

Learn more about SchoolFood4Change's suggested measures to make public food procurement more sustainable.

Access the SchoolFood4Change Procurement Handbook here:



**Policy Recommendations on How to Reduce the Distance Between Demand and Supply of Organic Food in Public Food Procurement**

– with some concrete examples from SF4C cities have been developed to provide information to cities that would like to increase their share of organic food in their public canteens.

## Sources

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## Authors

**Ilsa Phillips** (IFOAM Organics EU)

## Contributors

**Pinja Pöytäniemi** (IFOAM Organics EU)  
**Cristina Sossan** (Municipality of Milan, Italy)  
**Sabina Nicoletta** (Fondazione Ecosistemi, Italy)  
**Brigita Tool** (Stockholm Environment Institute, Tallinn, Estonia)  
**Paola Hernandez** (Mensa Civica, Spain)  
**Orsolya Diófasi-Kovács** (Municipality of Budapest, Hungary)  
**Marijke Van Ranst** (BioForum, Belgium)  
**Amalia Ochoa** (ICLEI Europe)  
**Monika Rut** (ICLEI Europe)  
**Vivien Franck** (ICLEI Europe)

## Reviewers

**Jean-Marc Louvin** (ICLEI Europe)



[www.schoolfood4change.eu](http://www.schoolfood4change.eu)



[info@schoolfood4change.eu](mailto:info@schoolfood4change.eu)



[instagram.com/sf4c\\_project](https://www.instagram.com/sf4c_project)



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