

Dear European policy-makers,

It's time to revolutionize our current Public Food Procurement recipe.

We are a team of young students and professionals, including chefs, gastronomists, nutritionists, food procurement officers, lawyers, and researchers advancing the transition to a sustainable European food system. We recently attended the 10th Edition of Eating City Summer Campus, learning how cities like Ghent, Copenhagen, as well as Scotland and Dordogne, have succeeded in making public food procurement more healthy, fair, inclusive, green, and ethical, which inspired us to write this declaration.

The objective of this declaration is to showcase our perspective on the need for immediate policy action around public food procurement.

Public procurement accounts for 14% of the EU's GDP. One in 5 European citizens consume food provided by social food service every day. Additionally, insights gained from the recent COVID-19 pandemic have shown the value of effective supply chains, which form a baseline for public procurement.

Our recipe for successful, sustainable public food procurement includes ingredients, people, and technology.

Ingredients

Public food procurement holds significant potential to promote the production and consumption of delicious, safe, nutritious, fresh, diverse, and seasonal foods produced using certified organic and other agroecological practices.

Sustainable public food procurement is also able to support a circular economy; reduce carbon, water and ecological footprints; shorten supply chains; and reduce food loss and waste—especially through the lowering of cosmetic specifications for fresh products.

Its socioeconomic impact will result in fairer labour conditions, advanced gender equality, the integration of underrepresented groups (such as disabled people and former convicts), the support of social cooperatives and small- and medium-sized farms and enterprises.

Fairly traded food products ensure full compliance with applicable employment and labour legislation.

Considering these themes or minimum mandatory sustainable criteria to qualify for public tenders will help transition to more sustainable public food procurement, fostering trust, and encouraging innovation.

People

Promoting dialogue between all actors within the food supply chain, from producers to consumers, both before and throughout the procurement process, is essential.

By engaging with potential suppliers before the procurement process, civil servants can identify new criteria for procurement, going beyond the criterion for the lowest cost for food.

We propose investments in training and coaching chefs to prepare delicious, nutritious, seasonal meals—including plant-based recipes.

When we acknowledge and support the key role of people who produce, buy, prepare, and serve food in social catering, we will build food literacy and healthier communities.

Kitchen staff should be empowered to monitor food consumption and food waste to evaluate and adapt their menu to the consumer's needs, within the boundaries of the food-based dietary guidelines.

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Introducing food education into school curricula helps pupils learn about nutrition, food sourcing, seasonality, and the impact of food choices. Engaging communities through transdisciplinary dialogue, and celebrating intergenerational knowledge-sharing activities will further strengthen this effort.

Technology

Technology needs to support human skills, not replace them. The availability and use of data and technology enhances transparency and traceability, which can lead to sustainable sourcing. Investing in the creation of digital software that municipalities can use to access information concerning agrifood topics can help implement these criteria and transform the perception of food as a commodity.

The bureaucratic burdens producers experience can be lightened by granting access to upload their relevant data on the e-platform directly connecting them, making them visible for public procurement officers, to which intermediaries would be also granted access if farmers desire it. Intermediaries selected through a participatory approach can support small- and medium-scale producers, particularly in updating their information on the platform to comply with required food standards. Data and technology can also be used within public institutions to monitor and manage stocks, meals, and waste efficiently.

A locally contextualized handbook of guiding principles delving into the highlighted themes and explaining the use of the software would support the transition to a more inclusive and transparent supply chain.

Conclusion

The discussion around public food procurement's role in creating a sustainable food future is far from theoretical. Public administrations can use their considerable purchasing power to drive positive change.

Food choices are often time-constrained and shaped by a large range of physical, financial, political, and sociocultural influences, most of which are beyond an individual's control.

By deciding what is offered and consumed in public places—such as schools, hospitals, and government institutions—public entities can drive demand for sustainable, nutritious products, contributing to rebalancing the distribution of power relations along the value chain.

We have shown that we already have the ingredients for a sustainable menu—targeted policy actions for food public procurement, monitoring and evaluation, education and dialogue. We have been missing the right recipe: a holistic interconnected system, guided by supportive measures and minimum mandatory sustainable standards, backed up by implementation and accountability.

This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to secure the future of our continent's food system. When all is done, we will have something much greater than a meal. We will have a system that nourishes communities, builds prosperity, and protects our planet.

Our recipe is for a flavorful, fair, fuller life. Are you ready to cook up this change?

Join our call for action.

La Bergerie de Villarceaux, 8/09/2024

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VILLARCEAUX DECLARATION 2024

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