



# Sustainable Food Procurement

Review of good practices  
across the EU



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Institute for  
European  
Environmental  
Policy

# Introduction

European food systems are responsible for 30% of the European Union's (EU) greenhouse gas emissions (Crippa et al, 2021). Transforming them is therefore essential to achieving the climate and environmental goals of the European Green Deal. In the public sector, administrations can use their significant purchasing power to drive broad changes in the food sector. Public procurement, defined as the purchase of goods, services and works by governments and public enterprises, offers an interesting lever for action. By setting minimum sustainability criteria for food purchases, public administrations can contribute to the creation of healthier, sustainable and fairer food environments, as envisaged in the EU Farm to Fork Strategy.

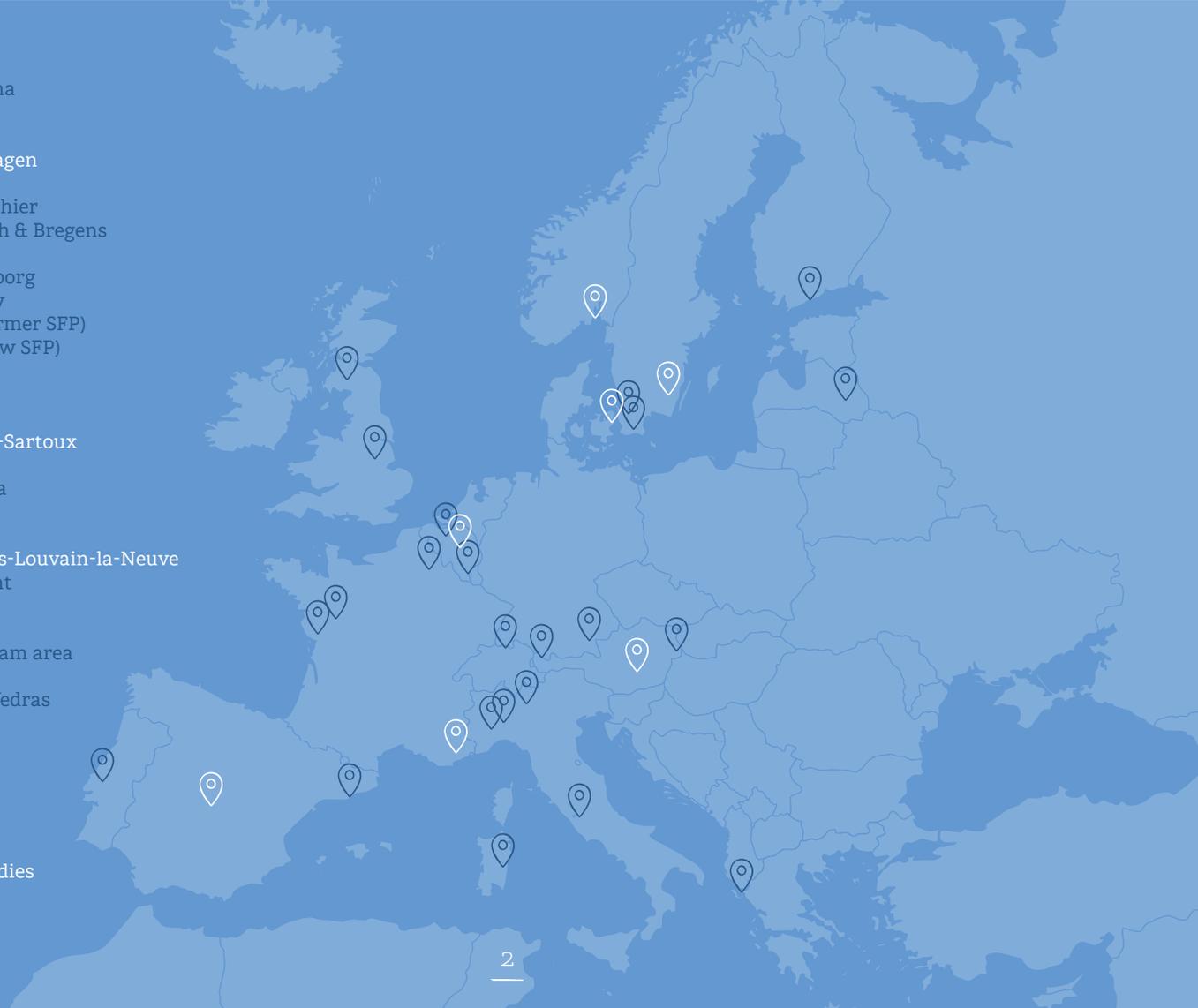
At the European level, programmes have been developed to support sustainable procurement. For example, the EU has set up "Green Public Procurement" criteria and the "Buy Social" guide, which aim to help public authorities implement sustainable procurement from an environmental, social, health, economic and political perspective. However, these initiatives remain voluntary and European and national legislation (law and policies) can impede the development of sustainable food procurement at the local level. Still, innovative sustainable food initiatives are increasingly being developed by cities and regional authorities and good practices that could be scaled-up should be highlighted and disseminated.

This policy brief presents innovative examples of sustainable food procurement (SFP) developed by local authorities to identify good practices and inform decision-makers. It first gives an overview of the cases identified in the EU, then it provides examples of successful SFP from an environmental, economic and social point of view. Finally, it draws conclusions on the levers and barriers to the development of SFP.

# 1 Overview

We reviewed 33 case studies according to seven sustainability criteria, developed in the framework of the *Buy Better Food (BBF) Campaign*<sup>1</sup>. The seven criteria selected focused on: healthy food, organic products, support for small farmers, environmental and climate action (eg. food waste, transport, packaging), social economy and labour rights (eg. employment of disadvantaged or long-term unemployed), fair trade and animal welfare standards. Out of these, nine relevant case studies are presented in detail, grouped into three dimensions of sustainability: environment and climate, economic and social. The first dimension includes the case studies on organic farming and climate change action, the second includes examples of support to small producers and fair trade, and the last one includes the case studies of social economy, labour law and animal welfare.

First, the analysis of the wider sample shows that northern European countries and cities are the most engaged in the development of SFP. Most of the procurement initiatives identified target school canteens, while a few of them were focused on other public kitchens, such as hospitals, nursing homes etc. Cases from Eastern and Southern countries were difficult to find and are not well represented in the sample.



- Austria
- Barcelona
- Basel
- Belgium
- Copenhagen
- Corfu
- East Ayrshire
- Feldkirch & Bregens
- Ghent
- Helsingborg
- Helsinki
- Lens (former SFP)
- Lens (new SFP)
- Madrid
- Malmö
- Milan
- Mouans-Sartoux
- Munich
- Mutualia
- Nantes
- Oslo
- Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve
- Piedmont
- Plavinu
- Rome
- Rotherham area
- Sardinia
- Torres Vedras
- Turin
- Växjö
- Vendée
- Vienna

Selected case studies in white

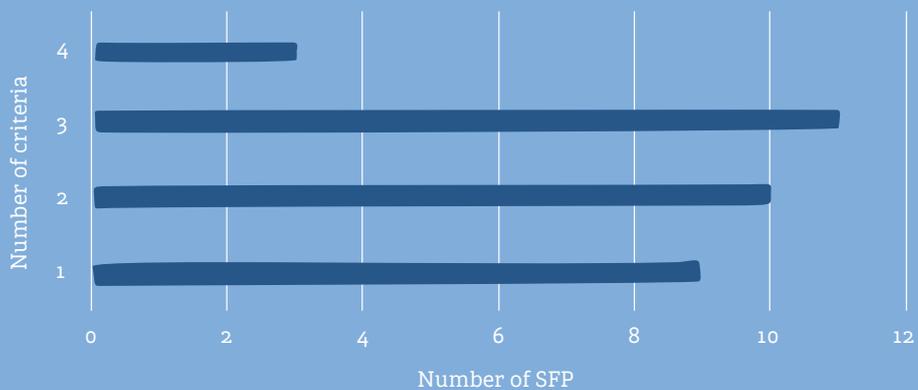
Secondly, when looking at the criteria used, we found that most of the examples studied target several criteria at the same time rather than one: most (21 cases) cover 2 or 3 criteria, as shown by the graph below.

Among the initiatives that cover several criteria, organic food and environmental-climate actions are the most common (22 and 23 schemes covered these, respectively), with many targeting both and also including social clauses. On the opposite end, we found that 9 case studies use only one criterion. Of these, most concern either the environmental-climate dimension (6/9). Initiatives considering animal welfare were rare. Only two cities focus on that criterion (among other things) and another one is currently considering including it in future.

Third, we found that SFP related to healthy food mostly framed health as an objective, rather than including it as a criterion. Food procurement addressing healthy food and diets always includes several other criteria, most often related to organic products or environmental and climate action. For example, criteria can include the procurement of organic fresh products, reduction in meat and an increase in plant protein consumption.

Finally, we found that some SFP practices are embedded in broader food strategies or policies implemented at the local level (eg. cities). This will be further discussed in the conclusion.

Number of criteria included SFP initiatives



Number of identified SFP for each sustainability criteria



# 2 Environmental and climate criteria of food sustainability

In this first section, we focus on food procurement related to organic food and environmental and climate action.



The rules contributed to a **70% increase in organic farming** in some regions

## Copenhagen Denmark



Denmark and the city of Copenhagen have been pioneers in the development of organic food consumption for more than 30 years. Copenhagen has pursued an organic agenda since 2001 and already achieved 90% of organic products in its public canteens in 2019 (schools, nursing and elderly homes, day-care centres and homes for people with intellectual disabilities). The latest public tender called for 100% organic and seasonal fruit and vegetables.

Overall, organic public procurement has contributed to a five-fold increase in organic sales in the food service sector from 2011-2019<sup>2</sup> which has been a significant contributing factor to the 70% increase in organic farming areas in Denmark in this same period. Other positive impacts include on water quality: the annual consumption of organic milk in the municipality prevented pesticide contamination of about 371 million litres of groundwater. Additional climate-environmental, social, health and economic positive effects have been observed (e.g. related to food waste and job satisfaction among kitchen staff), even though some are difficult to quantify.

These results are attributable to both the combination of a strong policy framework and initiatives from the organic sector. From the framework perspective, clear goals have been set at the national level, which have served as a strong motivation at all levels of government. For example, beyond Copenhagen, in 2011 the Danish government set the goal of reaching 60% of organic products served in canteens at national level. Funds were also allocated to training for staff kitchens and education for all to support the transition technically and culturally, and to capacity-building in the organic sector; NGOs and the Ministry of Food and Agriculture and labels have also been created for organic canteens. In addition, there are many initiatives from NGOs and along the supply chain for organic food. For example, a campaign led by stakeholders from the national administration, farm and consumer unions, NGOs, and food professionals, was created to demonstrate best practices in organic kitchens to the local and regional government, trade union leaders and kitchen managers. NGOs and local administrations also created different

training programmes about the benefits of organic food and new cooking techniques (cooking less meat, reducing waste etc). The city was also successful in maintaining the same price for meals because the

higher prices of organic products has been compensated for by a reduction in meat purchases and more seasonal products, keeping meals accessible for low-income households.

# Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve

Belgium



The Belgian city of Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve wanted to provide its school canteens with healthy food, raise awareness of sustainable food among children, staff and parents, reduce food waste, support the sustainable food market and train long-term unemployed persons. To do so, they put out a tender for September 2018 to August 2022 for the preparation of meals, their distribution and the management of the food waste produced based on a) sustainability and social criteria, and b) after consulting both a dietician on the public needs and the catering services on what was feasible from the market.

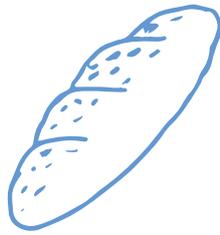
Based on the result, the city embraced a step-by-step approach to raise the share of sustainable products. For example, the contractor had to provide 15% of organic food in the first year and 20% in the fourth and last year (up to 100% for certain specific products such as eggs). The catering service also had to provide 100% fair trade certified products, such as bananas or fish, and a certain percentage of seasonal food depending on the month<sup>3</sup> (accounting for 75% of fruits and vegetables for 2021-2022). Moreover, the programme reduced animal protein consumption: serving two vegetarian meals a week, one meal with meat (most often white meat) and one meal made with fish. The city is also limiting packaging and food waste by educating

children and weighing food left on plates and uneaten leftovers from the catering service daily. The data recorded are then provided to a Meal's Commission (including the city and the catering service) for analysis and adjustment of future menus to avoid further wastage and provide children with the portion they actually need. Finally, staff and children have been trained and educated in sustainable food and balanced nutrition and participated in exchanges in order to come up with a menu adapted to children's tastes.

In the end, the city exceeded its target for organic products, serving 46,63 % of organic products instead of 20% for the 2021-2022 academic year. By monitoring food waste, the city reduced food waste from 28.7% in December 2010 to around 12% today in its school canteens. Serving vegetarian meals twice a week led to total savings of 42.8 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent in a year. Educating staff and children has also been identified as a key part of success as it fosters acceptance and a learning experience. Moreover, according to the food procurement manager, this public food procurement incentivised producers to convert to organic farming in order to meet the city's demand. A new set of specifications is currently being drafted for implementation in January 2023, with both more ambitious targets for existing criteria along with new criteria (e.g. potentially animal welfare). The weighing of food waste was identified as the most onerous task and the catering service asked to stop it, but the city refused.



*The city managed to halve food waste in its school canteens*



# Mouans-Sartoux

## France

The city of Mouans-Sartoux serves 1000 to 1100 meals a day in their schools' canteens which are made with 100% organic and local food, without incurring additional costs.

This success relies on a broader sustainable food policy developed, monitored and evaluated by a municipal department. First, when purchasing public food, the city establishes different contracts depending on the product family (fish, bread, vegetables etc.). The products purchased must be 100% organic, fresh, seasonal, have limited packaging and reduced transport footprint, and use high-quality plant and animal proteins. Specifications are also being reviewed, with existing ones being improved and new ones being introduced. For example, they are looking at potential ways to introduce animal welfare criteria<sup>4</sup>. Exotic products, such as coffee, must be labelled fair trade and social criteria are also considered for certain product categories such as meat, by awarding additional "bonus" points. However, because the market can't provide enough products that meet Mouans-Sartoux's meal standards, the city created a municipal farm that provides 96% of the vegetables eaten in school canteens. The staff, children, and parents are also trained and educated on food sustainability which makes acceptance easier.

Mouans-Sartoux's Food Strategy is embedded in a local ecosystem, in which all stakeholders (municipal government, farmers, schools, and parents) are involved.

In addition to reaching 100% organic, Mouans-Sartoux has also managed to drastically reduce its food waste. The city has been measuring schools' food waste since the first years of implementation in 2011, thanks to weighing systems, and reported an 80% reduction in food waste between then and 2018. On average, this represents 40 to 50g of food waste compared to 110-120g nationally. This reduction was achieved by several steps: adapting the size of portions to children's actual needs (e.g. smaller portions than national recommendations) and cooking part of the meals on demand. More broadly, the 2022 results of Mouans-Sartoux Food Strategy report that 3 people out of 4 changed their food behaviour thanks to the city's food policy, suggesting positive spillover effects within households.



Mouans-Sartoux managed to reduce food waste by 80%



# 3

## The economic aspect of food sustainability

Food procurement can also be used to support small farmers economically in the EU and abroad, either by targeted food procurement or by including fair trade clauses.

### Madrid Spain



*The regulation has helped the social conditions of workers in coffee, cacao, tea and sugar production*

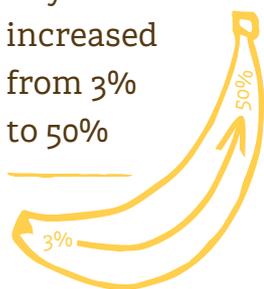
In 2017 the municipality of Madrid passed a regulation regarding fair trade products that applies to food procurement made by city services<sup>5</sup>. It requires that if one city service is ordering any of the following products: coffee, tea or other infusions, sugar, candies, cookies, cocoa cream, instant cocoa, pure cocoa, chocolates, chocolate bars and bars, then at least one of them has to be 100% fair trade. Tenderers are welcome to include more fair trade products which will provide them more points thus increasing their probability of winning, and therefore the share of final fair trade products. This gradual approach has been chosen to make firms discover fair trade so that they can call into question their practices and voluntarily choose to provide more fair trade products. The city is also proposing guidelines to include green criteria (similar to the EU's GPP criteria) in food procurement, but it is not mandatory.

This regulation led to two main impacts. First, it increased and improve public authority and therefore businesses' knowledge and use of fair trade. An increasing number of tenderers did provide more than only one product in their offer. Second, according to the Madrid authorities, the regulation has helped the social conditions of workers in coffee, cacao, tea and sugar production. 168 major municipal contracts (each worth more than €18,000) and 66 minor contracts (contracts below 18,000 euros without public bidding) have been concluded between 2017 and 2020, including contracts for 47 nursery schools with canteen services.

# Oslo

## Norway

The share of **fair-trade and organic bananas** in the city facilities increased from 3% to 50%



The Agency for Improvement and Development (AID) of Oslo carried out procurement programmes for three framework agreements for food and beverages, fruits and vegetables and dairy products. Beyond environmental matters (e.g. procurement of organic products), it included social criteria to assure that fundamental human and labour rights were respected.

Regarding fair trade products, the procurement focuses on the supply of bananas and coffee, which must be 100% fair trade certified, but awards extra points to bidders who include other products of fair trade origin. It also only considered bidders able to prove suitable quality management and traceability system

to verify compliance with social clauses throughout the supply chain. Those criteria came as part of a broader strategy on procurement (2017), which aims at realising cost-effective and sustainable procurement in a way that makes Oslo a greener, more socially inclusive and innovative city.

As result, in the first four months of 2019, the share of publicly-procured fair trade and organic bananas in city facilities increased from 3% to 50% and the share of fair trade coffee increased from 9% to 13%. According to the city report, the share of organic food also increased. Oslo intends to improve and reinforce the social responsibility of its food procurement criteria by considering social risk assessment for selected products and progressive social contract performance clauses, such as an increasing share of other selected fair trade products during the contract period.



# Austria

In 2012 the Federal Public Procurement Agency (BBG) of Austria introduced a national framework contract for supplying 350 kitchens in public organisations with dairy products, with the aim to support environmental-friendly production methods. The sub-objectives were to support organic and non-genetically modified products, small and local dairy farmers, with deliveries within one working day and deliver value for money.

The tender contained a list of 135 of the most used dairy products, with a subgroup of 16 products focusing on milk and butter. 15% of the products from the core list must come from organic farms, and the 16 milk and butter products listed must comply with the criteria set out in the Austrian action plan on sustainable procurement.

The project was monitored, and the system included quarterly reports, evaluation meetings with suppliers, a comprehensive complaint resolution process and quality verification by external specialists.

The contract helps strengthen responsible purchasing and create demand for low environmental impact dairy products, decreasing the carbon footprint for this sector. It supports local farmers whose agriculture has positive impacts on soil, biodiversity and also CO<sub>2</sub> emissions as it involves less transport. However, *the project is still in the early stages of implementation and therefore it is too early to consider as a best practice example for the EU. Results will be discussed next year.*



Supplying 350 kitchens in public organisations with **environmental-friendly dairy products**

# 4 Social side of food sustainability

Food procurement can also foster social sustainability by supporting social economy goals (e.g. insertion in the labour market) or animal welfare.

## Belgium



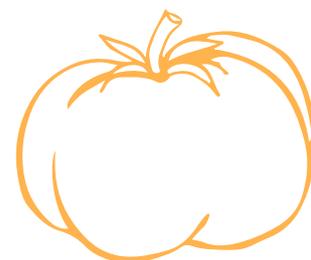
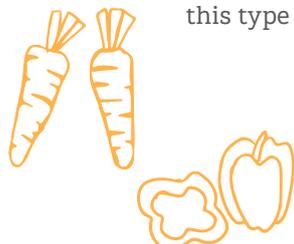
The Federal Public Planning Service for Social Integration (PPS SI) procures food products distributed for free to people living under the poverty threshold. It set up a tender in the frame of the FEAD<sup>6</sup> for making and distributing soup from surplus vegetables, that has been granted to a consortium of 10 work-insertion social enterprises, employing disadvantaged workers.

Beyond offering sustainable food for the most deprived, the initiative allowed social enterprises to collaborate together and improve their competencies and experiences. Moreover, not only it has positive social impacts, but it also fostered food waste reduction. This combination of both social and environmental dimensions in one framework leads firms to be innovative.

Several factors contributed to the success of this initiative. For instance, the PPS SI organised an information session for potential bidders prior to the deadline for the submission of tenders, so that they could fully understand the task and propose something relevant and ambitious. The capacity of social enterprises to create a consortium and cooperate to find the necessary food products also played a crucial role. According to the PPS SI, the initiative would need to improve technical requirements in a way that will make the logistics easier and more cost-efficient (e.g. limit the need for refrigerated storage). It should also design special cooperation techniques between FEAD and European Social Fund programmes (e.g. local European Social Fund initiatives) in order to enhance funding sources for the employment and training costs involved in this type of procurement.



**The combination of both social and environmental criteria in one framework leads firms to be innovative**





## Växjö

Sweden



The city of Växjö is one of the few examples of animal welfare being addressed in public procurement. Växjö's environmental objectives included increasing the share of organically produced food to at least 80% by 2020, while reducing transport and packaging associated with food production and delivery. To reach its objectives it has developed a number of initiatives, including a public procurement scheme to supply the city with eggs.

The city has included several criteria, some of which relate to ensuring the welfare of the hens. Firstly, the eggs must be certified organic, a certification that guarantees good conditions for the welfare of the farm animals, in terms of space, light

and infrastructure. In addition, the eggs must come from laying hens that are bred according to several rules in terms of feed quality, antibiotics use, beak trimming practices and outdoor access.

The total supply of organic eggs for the city of Växjö was expected to be about 82% organic in 2020 (however this result couldn't be verified). Because only one major supplier applied to the bid, the city concluded that for upcoming tenders they should be more informative, write simpler tenders, and have more dialogue with smaller suppliers.



The total supply of **organic eggs** for the city of Växjö was expected to be about **82% organic in 2020**



# 5 Synthesis

## Main findings and lessons learned

Food procurement has an important upstream impact on food markets as it influences demand, and hence supply. Indeed, by creating market opportunities, sustainable public procurement can reduce the risks and barriers faced by producers and encourage them to move towards more sustainable production systems.

At the local level, there is growing awareness and efforts are being made to improve the quality of the meals provided by public authorities from a health and climate point of view. SFP initiatives often offer organic and seasonal products and intend to reduce both the proportion of meat served and food waste. Fair trade clauses are increasingly considered for products coming from outside the EU. However certain criteria are still seldom included in public food contracts, in particular animal welfare, support for small and local farmers, and labour rights in EU farms.

Such sustainable procurement is not necessarily easy to implement. Key barriers are: high administrative burden, the time required for research and implementation when starting from scratch, lack of political support and national or EU policies. Most are constrained by their national framework which promotes rules or recommendations that are misaligned with local needs and data. For instance, dietary guidelines are misaligned with what children actually need in terms of quantity which often leads to food waste. Public services are also constrained by the EU single market rules which prevent them from favouring specific (such as local) products. Even if some barriers have been overcome by administrations, it is still difficult and the implementation of SFP is not widespread in all cities. Therefore, a two-step approach would be needed: first, minimum sustainability criteria could be imposed in food procurement to make cities, so far lagging behind, implement SFP initiatives, and second, existing policies should

be reviewed to facilitate the implementation of ambitious SFP by cities which are already involved in the process and wish to go further.

Nevertheless, these barriers can be mitigated by certain factors in the design of SFP. For instance, it seems that “systemic food procurement” (i.e. including more than one criterion and addressing several aspects of sustainability such as social, economic, environmental, and food and nutrition goals) are more efficient in changing food production and consumption. Some cities, which are actively engaged in making the food transition, have established a comprehensive food strategy that goes beyond setting up SFP initiatives and are showing promising results. For example, Mouans-Sartoux which serves 100% of organic, fresh and local food, reached this result by investing in people and the city, through multiple activities (e.g. the creation of a municipal farm, a sustainable food festival etc.). Such systemic approaches are also more likely to produce spill-over effects with households improving their consumption of sustainable products, mainly because of joint actions targeting education—a key lever for effective SFP. Not only should kitchen staff be trained in new cooking methods and recipes, but also children and parents should be accompanied and made aware of sustainable food. This promotes acceptance and even the willingness to eat more vegetables, cereals and plant-based proteins beyond the public kitchens. Furthermore, step-by-step approaches also have positive effects, as they incentivise food providers to slowly improve the quality of their supply, as cases such as Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve and Madrid illustrate. Finally, local and political support is essential. Cities that have implemented successful SFP initiatives were significantly supported by local authorities that were keen to initiate an environmental transition in all domains.

# Notes

- 1 The Buy Better Food Campaign for sustainable food on the public plate, or Buy Better Food Campaign, is a coalition of pan-European non-profit organisations - including networks of local and regional governments, as well as civil society organisations focusing on climate change, health and human rights. The Campaign calls for the uptake of public food procurement rules that work for the environment, consumers, and workers, and that provide healthy food to European citizens in public places.  
<https://iclei-europe.org/topics/food/buy-better-food/>
- 2 Holmbeck, P. (2020). Best practice in Organic Public Procurement: The case of Denmark A successful business case for organic public procurement. With useful lessons for other nations. IFOAM [https://www.organicseurope.bio/content/uploads/2021/06/IFOAMOE\\_Best-Practice-in-Organic-Public-Procurement\\_The-case-of-Denmark.pdf?dd](https://www.organicseurope.bio/content/uploads/2021/06/IFOAMOE_Best-Practice-in-Organic-Public-Procurement_The-case-of-Denmark.pdf?dd)
- 3 According to a Walloon Produce calendar
- 4 Following Etica approach of the Welfarm organisation
- 5 It doesn't apply to public/private institution
- 6 Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived
- 7 Identified by various public sector authorities interviewed for this briefing

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# Core Team



## Coalition members till September 2022:

### NGOs and non-profit organisations

- NGOs and non-profit organisations
- Agrar Koordination
- Essere Animali
- European Environmental Bureau
- Fair Trade Advocacy Office
- Fundación Entretantos
- Health Care Without Harm Europe
- INTERBIO Nouvelle-Aquitaine
- Legambiente
- Red de Municipios por la Agroecología
- Rete Italiana Politiche Locali del Cibo
- Rikolto
- Skutočne zdravá škola
- Slow Food Europe

### Local and Regional Governments

- Biostädte Network (Germany) - including Augsburg, Berlin, Bonn, Bremen, Darmstadt, Erfurt, Erlangen, Freiburg, Freising, Hamburg, Heidelberg, Karlsruhe, Köln, Landshut, Lauf/Pegnitz, Leipzig, München, Ingolstadt, Nürnberg, Regensburg, Witzhausen
- Budapest (Hungary)
- Citta' del Bio - the 242 municipalities part of Organic Cities Network in 2018
- Copenhagen (Denmark)
- Dordogne Province (France)
- Essen (Germany)
- Ghent (Belgium)
- Leuven (Belgium)
- Lyon (France)
- Malmö (Sweden)
- Milan (Italy)
- Montpellier (France)
- Mouans-Sartoux (France)
- Nuremberg (Germany)
- Nuoro (Italy)
- Rennes (France)
- Strasbourg (France)
- Tallin (Estonia)
- Torino (Italy)
- Torres Vedras (Portugal)
- Valencia Region (Spain)
- Veneto Region (Italy)
- Vicenza (Italy)
- Vienna (Austria)
- Viimsi (Estonia)
- Umeå (Sweden)



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