

The Power of the Public Plate

Recommendations on how to use public procurement to create impact
across the Food Value Chain



One planet
procure with care



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A public plate that serves people and the planet

Public procurers hold the power to influence the entire food value chain and through their decisions can affect both production and consumption practices. This position creates a strategic opportunity to leverage public sector demand for sustainable development. Seizing the potential, however, comes with great complexity as it requires innovation within the respective procurement system, connecting the actual procurement to a much wider process linking to policy goals and engaging various stakeholders.

As a means to share how to turn this opportunity into implementation, we draw from the experience of champions of public food procurement as featured in the Power of the Public Plate Podcast as well as relevant guidance and case studies from across the world. The following gives actionable recommendations for procurers and policy makers towards procuring food with a value chain perspective.

The 'Value-Chain Approach' is a methodology for catalysing science-based policy action on sustainable consumption and production, developed by the International Resources Panel and the One Planet Network (2021). Its purpose is to identify key points of intervention within economic systems to reduce natural-resource use and environmental impacts caused by production and consumption, and to define a common agenda for action. [The report](#) describes that

while many activities are at primary production or individual consumption stage or are holistic; there is an opportunity to build on ongoing initiatives at the food processing, retail and food services – in particular through the sustainable tourism, sustainable procurement and consumer information programmes. This document entails two cross-cutting as well as seven specific recommendations on how to connect public food procurement to the different stages of the value chain.

Overall, the recommendations connect to creating a “sustainable food systems multi-stakeholder mechanism” (SFS MSM), a term coined by the [SFS Programme report 2021](#). A SFS MSM refers to a formal or informal participatory governance mechanism or collaborative arrangement that brings together diverse food systems actors e.g. government, private sector, NGOs, farmers with different food-related agendas from all stages of the value chain, in an inclusive way to collaborate in pursuit of sustainable food systems.

The actionable recommendations are meant to support public procurers as well as policy makers tasked with contributing to a sustainable food value chain.

“The limits of public procurement, or the public procurer? I don't like limits” - Betina Bergmann Madsen, Copenhagen, Denmark

Cross-cutting recommendations

Adopt system thinking & strategic linking

Sustainable food procurement means strategic procurement that supports systemic change.

- Map existing sustainability policies and targets at subnational and national level and engage with relevant departments to evaluate how procurers can leverage upcoming tenders to help achieve these ambitions.
- Practice and communicate around sustainable food procurement as a lever to localize the Sustainable Development Goals ranging from public health and environmental protection to education.
- Understand sustainable food procurement as a farm to fork procurement that has the potential to create impact along the entire food value chain.
- Connect the contribution of sustainable food procurement to efforts around more resilient and circular regional (food) economies.

“Procurement can again play a big role, because it’s a multi-policy and multi-actor tool which, by addressing a variety of environmental, social and economic objectives at the same time, can effectively contribute to a shift towards more sustainable models” - Matteo Gordini, Fondazione Ecosistemi, Italy

Establish multi-level governance arrangements

Sustainable food procurement means building connections across levels of government, with the ambition to foster implementation of actions.

- Explore the links and synergies between different governance levels around sustainable and healthy food e.g. national dietary guidelines; public health policies; support schemes for smallholder farmers, to connect the future food procurement.
- Embed the notion of ‘localized’ food procurement within a vertically integrated framing between the relevant local, sub-national (regional) and national governance.
- Establish formal or informal exchange mechanisms between government actors to

facilitate strategic sustainable food procurement.

"If we work together with the health sector and other sectors, it's easy to provide very nutritious and healthy products in schools." - Meti Tamrat, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

"When I do procurement, I always try to incorporate all the political goals, not just from my government's side but also from the national government's side and from the EU, but also from the UN side"- Betina Bergmann Madsen, Copenhagen, Denmark

Specific recommendations

Source locally through fresh and seasonal food items

Farmers within regional geographic proximity have grown the food that is later consumed, with seasonal variance. Sourcing locally impacts the stage of Primary Production and Food Processing/packaging, as it creates a demand for specific types of crops/livestock. Mode and arrangements of Transport and Logistics are impacted as well, with shorter distances between farm, processing and consumption. By sourcing local and seasonal food, the work in Food service changes as likely different types of meals have to be cooked and served.

How-to:

- Train and enable nutritionists to design food menus aligned with local food items.
- Train kitchen staff to cook with local ingredients.
- Engage in dialogue with local farmers to assure accessibility to the public sector market.
- Use criteria that prioritize fresh, low processed and seasonal food, whilst taking into consideration local cultures, food habits and preferences.
- Establish long-term collaboration among public buyers, producers and nutritionists.
- Favor traditional dishes rich in local fruits and vegetable varieties that support biodiversity and tend to be more economic.

Expert's perspective with quotes from the Power of the Public Plate Podcast

"It seems like over the last year and a half, with the labor shortages and supply chain disruptions associated with the pandemic, it has been primarily the national supply chains that have been

disrupted. And in places where there are strong regional relationships with producers, the disruption has been minimized [...]. and so it really builds the case for why it's so critical to invest in infrastructure all along the supply chain regionally to withstand the disruptions that we know are going to continue for many years, particularly with the climate crisis. So I think those investments in local processing, distribution, wholesale, kitchens etc., that is what will create more resiliency." - Alexa Delwiche, Good Food Purchasing Programme, USA

"Seen from the procurement side, it would be the best to talk with the market: what is available, what is easy to get, what is already around in my area. It all also depends on the kitchen staff who cooks the meals. Because without them and without them using the contract as it's thought to, we will not have a sustainable procurement, so it's all bound together." - Betina Bergmann Madsen, Copenhagen, Denmark

Support smallholder farmers

Enabling small farmers to deliver their produce independently from big food companies, operating with better profit margins, with an emphasis on supporting women-led farms. This shift in practice mainly impacts the stage of Primary Production with an emphasis on who is growing and harvesting the produce. In addition, this impacts on the Food Processing stage, as procurers need to work with traders/producers towards higher shares of produce coming from smallholder farmers.

How-to

- Establish long-term engagement with traders, producers and farmers connected to policies around supporting Micro, Small and Medium-sized enterprises.
- Set up a regulatory framework with clear eligibility criteria, a national identification system and a unified definition of smallholder farmers
- Provide legal and administrative support for farmers who may lack the knowledge to accomplish the registration procedure to qualify as supplier to the public sector market.
- Leverage the planning stage of each tender to work through the tender documents/ procurement structure.
- Ensure access to information about upcoming tenders on time and through the channels appropriate to the local context.

- Reform the type of bid security needed since it adds financial and administrative burden, especially for small farmers .
- Be consistent in the criteria applied and assuring their relatability to the local food system features.
- Divide larger tenders into smaller lots and simplify food quality and safety requirements to guarantee access to smallholders.
- Purchase produce directly from (family) farms (less intermediates → “short food supply chains”) or incentivize producers/traders to source produce from small farms.
- Allow for variants of food items, when suppliers can meet the minimum amount required.
- Assure timely payments, as they are crucial especially for smallholders who face cash constraints.

Expert’s perspective with quotes from the Power of the Public Plate Podcast

“[Our project] is an example that the commitment of a local government is important to create better conditions for local farmers and diversity in the local economy. Also, improve the condition of food security in urban areas.” - Mirian Johanna Zambrano Benavides, Manta, Ecuador

“Strengthening those value chains directly with the local farmers may help us to gain fresh and good quality products at a good price, and therefore to scale up this programme and make it more effective.” - Meti Tamrat, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Support a healthy and nutritious diet

Serving food that is rich in nutrients and supports a balanced diet. Mainly impacting on the stages of Primary Production, Food Service and Individual consumption. Farmers will have to grow food items high in nutrients, kitchen staff will cook new types of meals and individuals will consume meals in public sector canteens and vending machines that are beneficial to their health.

How-to

- Apply criteria based on nutrition guidelines.
- Integrate educational programmes on nutrition with meals served.
- Include criteria that specify a high variety of produce (food culture & traditions).

- Link procurement to activities of school feeding programmes.
- Train staff (kitchen/catering) to cook non-highly processed, plant-rich food items.

Expert's perspective

"When we went into Busia, African indigenous vegetables were considered food for the poor, albeit the fact that they are highly nutritious. After we arranged the data to show that they are of high nutritional value, we used that data to teach people in Busia and to teach people at policy level" - Victor Wasike, Busia County, Kenya

"[In] this time where healthy food is no longer a fad, our message to our constituency is that healthy food is not going to be an expensive alternative, so we realized along the way that we have enough Filipino foods that are healthy, we just need to promote that, and we just need to be aware that this would benefit us" - Andrea Villaroman, Quezon City, Philippines

"When you're reasoning as a public administration, you can not look just at the direct cost of what you're purchasing, but you have to look also at the other costs, the hidden costs that you're avoiding. So, if you are purchasing products that are creating local wealth, that create local job opportunities, that reduce health problems of pupils, but also health problems linked for example to the production of food, then you might be paying a higher cost for the catering services, but you're avoiding other costs in other spheres of your actions. So you always have to balance and make evident for the public administration what the real benefits, also in economic terms, are when you procure sustainable food" - Sabina Nicoletta, Fondazione Ecosistemi, Italy

Enable fair employment conditions

Assuring safe, healthy and fair working conditions across the value chain, requiring compliance with [eight core values of the ILO labor convention as minimum](#). Naturally this impacts each stage of the value chain, with an emphasis on Primary Production i.e. farmers and Food Service i.e. kitchen and catering staff.

How-to

- Establish a regulatory framework that enables procurers to address the working conditions of people working in the entire food supply chain.
- Ensure the appropriate balance between quality and price, particularly including the impact of low price on working conditions.

- Leverage criteria and contract clauses to get suppliers to demonstrate fair working practices along the food supply chain.
- Set a minimum requirement around the payment of living wage for staff.
- Include fair trade certification criteria e.g. Fairtrade International or an equivalent label.
- Use contract management to avoid social dumping by ensuring fair work practices throughout the duration of the contract, e.g. by requesting information on the pay, terms and conditions of workers involved in the delivery of the contract.
- Create employment opportunities to the local population e.g. mothers of school children qualifying as kitchen staff; community/district kitchens (kitchen labs), including award points for food from community-supported agriculture.

Source organic produce

Sourcing ingredients and food items that have been produced through organic farming techniques including agroforestry, regenerative agriculture or other sustainable production methods. Sourcing organic produce impacts the Input industry as it determines over type of seeds, use of fertilisers and reduction of pesticides. Procuring organic food also affects what kind of agricultural practices are the standard i.e. impacting on the Primary production stage in the value chain and Food Processing and Packaging as different food items will need to be prepared.

How-to

- Include environmental considerations within the procurement criteria.
- Increase farmers' awareness of the economic and environmental benefits of organic production practices.
- Reference organic (or advanced sustainable agriculture) certification schemes for verification.
- Give opportunities for a phased approach e.g. incremental increase of the share of organic produce when working with farmers as well as producers.
- Where possible, ensure organically sourced food is not imported by producers, and list (endemic) species to support local biodiversity and food culture (e.g. list and name variety of

apples instead of just mentioning apples).

Expert's perspective

"By buying more organic, we save the water from pesticides and other chemicals, and we saw [in 2001] that dwellings were being polluted [...] and we had to stop it. [So we decided] to start with ourselves and started transforming our food into more organic". - Betina Bergmann Madsen, Copenhagen, Denmark

Reducing waste from food and packaging

Tackling the amount of food wasted as well as single-use plastic and packaging waste affects various stages of the value chain. Procurement can impact on Food processing and packaging i.e. influencing type of packaging material used towards reuse and recyclability. The Food Service stage can change regarding menu planning, demand use or donation of left-overs, change of products used for serving food i.e. wrapping. Reducing food waste also connects to Individual consumption i.e. by addressing portion sizes. Reducing food and packaging waste creates change at Waste/Disposal with a reduced amount of waste and pollution in the first place, moving from disposal towards reuse and recycling.

How-to

- Address food waste and packaging reduction as strategic contribution to any such targets and policies, in particular circular economy and climate change mitigation.
- Support short food supply chains through local sourcing (see above) to harness the potential to reduce the environmental and carbon footprint as products from shorter distances require less transport and packaging.
- Consider fresh, seasonal and local food (from proximal SMEs and small-holder farmers).
- Look out for new and user-friendly tools and good practices that help procurers to assess the carbon and resource footprint of their procured meals.
- Invest in market engagement with all stakeholders to understand in a co-creational process where and how food waste and packaging can be reduced in the food chain and through procurement.

"I just had the addition of three new granddaughters, and that keeps me going to make sure that we have sustainability in our planet and our food system for the future generations." - Bertrand Weber, Minneapolis, USA

Increase the share of plant-rich food and support animal welfare

Favouring / increasing share of plant-based meals and assuring good living conditions of farm animals impacts on several stages of the value chain. At the level of Primary Production it means impact on well-being standard for and reduction of the amount of livestock and industrial fishing practices. At the stage of Individual consumption, it changes the selection of meals available in public sector canteens and vending machines.

How-to

- Allocate funds for awareness campaigns on the sometimes delicate topic of plant-rich food by e.g. emphasising and supporting in the procurement local food culture and products that are often very plant-rich and less expensive.
- Use the two key arguments of less cost and carbon reduction for a strategic food procurement.
- Make potentially stricter national animal welfare legislation conditional to any food supply and bids from other countries, impacting on practices of producers.
- Increase the share of local species of fruits and vegetables to demonstrate the territorial impact in terms of biodiversity, culture and community.

Expert's perspective

"It's important that local governments know their territories. So I can suggest [to local governments and procurers] that they can begin with fruit [...] or fresh products." - Mirian Johanna Zambrano Benavides, Manta, Ecuador

Closing

Public food procurement can have enormous impact. As the value-chain approach highlights, public procurers are strategically placed along the food value chain to have a great deal of influence on both production and consumption patterns, based on their purchasing decisions.

If seized for the benefit of people and planet, this impact can contribute to a responsible, healthy and resilient food value chain. As outlined above, there are various entry points to sustainable food procurement, which procurers and policy makers alike can start working with.

Whilst the recommendations are not a panacea and need to be tailored to local contexts, they are a means to turn food for thought into food for action. One tender at a time.

“First you have to have good champions who will carry this kind of idea that is probably new, probably uncomfortable to some, probably something that others would hesitate to try. But just taking that first step to try something new, something that would improve the nutritional status, the health of your citizens, will go a long way.” - Ma-Anne Rosales-Santo Domingo, Quezon City, Philippines