

## Procuring Sustainable School Food – An interview with Prof. Roberta Sonnino

Roberta Sonnino is a Professor in the School of Planning and Geography at Cardiff University, where she directs the Research Centre for Sustainable Urban and Regional Food and the MSc course Food, Space and Society.



### 1. In your opinion, what is needed to help public bodies make their tenders for food and/or catering services more climate-friendly?

Over the years, the EU has made a lot of progress with the development of its public procurement policies. Progressive reforms of the legislation and regulatory context have facilitated the inclusion of social and environmental criteria in the award criteria of tenders. However, one critical area in which, in my opinion, there is still a lot of work to be done is public food procurement. A climate-friendly food and catering service relies, first of all, on the use of fresh and seasonal ingredients to reduce the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions associated with processing, packaging, “food miles” and waste. The [City of Rome](#), for example, once used “guaranteed freshness” as an award criterion for its school food tendering process, evaluating the environmental friendliness of the foods offered on the basis of the number of hours each ingredient had travelled before reaching the school kitchens. It’s important for public bodies to understand that, even though this type of sourcing strategy may require more financial investment, it also results in long term benefits in other budgetary accounts – public health, education (reconnecting citizens with their food), social inclusion, economic development and, of course, reduced environmental externalities. When you try to quantify these benefits as they have, for instance, in Scotland, you will see that it’s a worthwhile investment; you are paying a bit more at times for fresh and unprocessed ingredients, you will need to create (or maintain) the physical infrastructure (e.g. kitchens, equipment, staff) necessary to prepare fresh meals, but you are saving money that would otherwise be spent on dealing with high rates of obesity and diet-related diseases, pollution, loss of jobs, waste management and so on.

We need to work together to ensure that public bodies receive the appropriate resources and training to design and implement a food and catering service that is based on sustainability, rather than on a cost-cutting culture. “Best value” shouldn’t be assessed solely on the basis of the proposed costs of the food and of the service. It should be assessed also on the basis of the contribution that a public food service makes to environmental integrity, economic equity and social justice. What kind of environmental certifications do tendering companies



have? What is their labour policy? What plans do they have in place to recycle the food and reduce food losses and waste? Are they able to source organic, PDO/PGI and Fair Trade nutritious foods? These are the questions public bodies should ask themselves when they award their food procurement contracts if we want to make the most of the enormous food security and sustainability power of public purchasing.

## **2. Locally sourced food is becoming more of an issue for many cities. What is your advice for addressing this issue when it comes to designing tenders and procurement policies?**

European legislation doesn't allow the use of the term "local" amongst the award criteria as it contravenes the principle of "non-discrimination on the basis of nationality" on which the EU common market has been founded. However, it is crucial for all public bodies in Europe to understand that this doesn't imply that no locally produced foods can be procured for schools, hospitals, care homes and other public canteens. Considering the importance of local sourcing to achieve a more climate-friendly and sustainable public food system, cities should adopt what we have called, in our "The School Food Revolution" book, a "creative" public procurement approach. In practice, this means two things. First, large contracts for food commodities should be divided into more manageable lots that make tendering a possibility for small producers and catering companies. Having one single call for tenders for all food served in local schools, for example, would attract large international companies only, which are in the position to easily source the necessary food and ingredients on a larger, mass produced, scale, than small and medium sized enterprises. However, if you have separate calls for tender for meat, fruit and vegetables, dairy products, poultry, etc. you are offering an opportunity to smaller and more specialised local producers to also participate in the competition. Second, creative procurement can enable cities to prioritise locally grown ingredients without using the term "local". In the call for tender, you may want to state, for example, that you want bread that has been baked not earlier than six hours before reaching the public canteens. A criterion of this kind doesn't exclude suppliers from other regions or even countries, but it makes life much easier for local producers. You can achieve similar outcomes through the use of terms such as "freshness" and "seasonality" in your call for tenders. You can describe local varieties of fruit, vegetables or meats in the contract specifications. Or, if you are located in countries such as Italy, France and Spain, which have large numbers of PDO/PGI products, you can use that certification as an incentive for local producers to enter the system.

Cities all over Europe are realising the importance of public procurement as a tool to improve food security and sustainability, but evidence from my research suggests that urban policies flourish especially in countries with a national legislation that supports local action. It is crucial that we harmonise policy goals across different levels of governance and create an enabling environment for local governments that are striving to realise the enormous sustainability potential of public food procurement.





### **3. In the current economic climate many public authorities are faced with shrinking public budgets. How can they therefore argue the case for procuring sustainable catering solutions?**

This is a very important issue. The key argument here is that public procurement is one of the most powerful tools that governments (national, regional, municipal) have at their disposal to create more sustainable economies and address today's major challenges. In the EU, public procurement represents 19 percent of the total GDP – a very large market where public authorities have a unique opportunity to integrate economic, social, environmental, and public health goals. This is especially the case for public food procurement. We need to remember that the economic crisis has had a very negative impact on Europe's food and nutrition security. An ever-increasing percentage of the European population is at risk of malnutrition, with all the human and health costs that this implies. For example, there are children for whom the school meal is the main, if not the only, meal of the day, and the provision of a nutritionally-balanced healthy meal in schools can make a huge difference for these children and their families. Prioritising fresh, seasonal and high quality ingredients can also provide a significant contribution to ongoing efforts to address other environmental challenges – from biodiversity preservation to climate change mitigation, from landscape conservation to animal welfare. Sustainable catering solutions can also deliver important socio-economic outcomes. They create market opportunities for farmers and quality food producers, they generate employment at all stages of the supply chain and they send very important educational messages to consumers, who can become more knowledgeable about the differences between healthy and unhealthy food, and the implications their food choices have. My advice to public authorities striving to obtain the funding needed to implement more sustainable catering solutions is this: make the critical connections that a public food system has with the environment, the economy and society explicit. Try to monitor and share evidence about the numerous benefits that your initiative will inevitably have in terms of public health, economic development, social justice, environmental integrity. Frame public food procurement for what it really is - an investment, not a cost.