



24 March 2022

Better Meals for Europe's Children: pathways to serving healthier, tastier, more sustainable food in schools

Event Report



INTRODUCTION

On Thursday 24 March 2022, the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) hosted the online event:

Better Meals for Europe's Children: pathways to serving healthier, tastier, more sustainable food in schools

Public food procurement can help address today's most pertinent challenges to health and well-being: from obesity to the climate crisis. Schools are important places to leverage the multiple health, environmental and social benefits of serving better food.

This online event brought together a wide range of actors to discuss the different aspects of moving towards healthy, sustainable school meals, and what implications for policy and practice this can have.

This event discusses various aspects of moving towards healthy, sustainable school meals.

- **Session 1** shines a spotlight on promising, inspiring real-life initiatives in cities and schools across Europe;
- **Session 2** discusses what are healthy and sustainable diets for young people, and how do they affect the design of school menus and canteens;
- **Session 3** debates how public policies can help accelerate the adoption of healthy, sustainable meals in European schools.

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WELCOME REMARKS & SETTING THE SCENE

Milka Sokolović | Director General at EPHA



There has been much attention lately to the role that public procurement of food can play in transforming the food system towards better outcomes for health, climate, environmental sustainability, the position of producers in the supply chain, and animal welfare.

Public procurement also serves an important social justice function: it allows our societies to send a clear message that every child, regardless of socioeconomic background, can and should receive the best possible nourishment.

Such focus on public procurement is warranted. Public authorities in the EU spend billions of euros on food procurement each year, and there is widespread agreement that these resources can be spent more wisely.

Manuel Franco, MD PhD | Universities of Alcalá and John Hopkins & Public health expert in the SchoolFood4Change project

"We should never forget that the most underserved communities and the most vulnerable children are the ones that will benefit the most from these approaches and this is what we need for a better Europe."



Today, most of our children live in cities. Understanding urban dynamics and food environments is critical for designing appropriate food policies, including public procurement. Given our current unequal world and unequal cities, any such policies must be focused on those children in most need.

Our food systems, including school food systems, should consider not only health but also sustainability. The *SchoolFood4Change* project, which has just kicked off, focuses on public school meals, which have the potential to transform how we feed our children in Europe.

The project aims to create a shift to both sustainable and healthy diets by impacting 600,000 school children and 3,000 schools in 12 EU countries. How to bring more sustainable and healthy meals to our children is an interdisciplinary question, requiring coordination between different professions and different levels, spanning local, European and international.



SESSION 1: WHAT'S COOKING IN EUROPE? SPOTLIGHT ON PROMISING INITIATIVES IN CITIES AND SCHOOLS

Elena Salazar | Eating Better Alliance, UK

Serving Better: every meal counts in a climate and nature emergency



"Local diets have global impacts"

The Eating Better Alliance's "Serving Better" initiative arose from a desire to assist councils and local governments in their efforts to help the environment by serving and sourcing healthier, more sustainable meals through food procurement.

The main idea is to put food at the centre of attention, reduce meat and dairy consumption to help lower the greenhouse gas emissions' footprint of diets and replace meat with more vegetables and legumes, to consume in an economically viable way.

Elena Salazar emphasised the effectiveness of focusing on manageable specific strategies and clear short-term targets, such as a 25% reduction in meat - most likely achieved by having meat-free days once or twice a week. Because children in the United Kingdom do not consume enough vegetables, supporting healthier diets or increasing their vegetable intake will be beneficial.

In terms of challenges, Elena noted that measuring environmental gains from better meals can pose difficulties. Also, while it is possible to achieve healthier, more sustainable school meals at a low cost, it requires a great deal of care and the development of suitable procurement frameworks.

Overall, there is much taste for changing school meal strategies and this movement is expected to grow further in the coming months and years in the United Kingdom.

Further information:

[Serving Better: every meal counts in a climate and nature emergency \(report and video\)](#)

Lidón Martrat Sanfeliu | Operational Coordinator Urban Food Policies, Pla Estratègic Metropolità de Barcelona & Barcelona City Council



Sustainable and healthy canteens in Barcelona



Lidón Martrat Sanfeliu presented an initiative for healthier and more sustainable school canteens in Barcelona – Menjadors escolars – which aims to promote a more balanced, sustainable, and healthier diet for children in schools, as well as combat the climate emergency and strengthen the local economy.

The trial started with 6 schools and is now being rolled out in 46 schools, accounting for 12% of schools in Barcelona. The menu was conceived based on WHO recommendations and tries to include more vegetables and less and better meat.

This initiative, overseen by the Barcelona Public Health Agency (ASPB), is comprehensive and engages the entire community: from public institutions and experts, to cooks, producers, teachers, and families.

The project takes a methodological approach, adapted to the pace of each school. The methodology includes joint planning, guidance, and training, including for catering companies. It also offers families materials and advice to encourage healthier and more sustainable cooking practices.

Key points, challenges and reflections for the future

- Communication to families (letter / documents) and educational community
- Continuous diagnosis and evaluation (previous pilot in 6 schools) and good monitoring (detection of new needs)
- Available and replicable protocols
- Shared community intervention: more sustainable
- Facilitate participation in decision making
- Initial training (4 key groups): key axis
- Key documents: ASPB website (guide / summary)
- Interdisciplinary technical office: dietitians, nutritionist, public health techniques, food policies, etc.



Further information:

[Healthier and more sustainable school canteens project \(Barcelona\)](#)

Andrea Magarini | Food Policy Coordinator, City of Milan



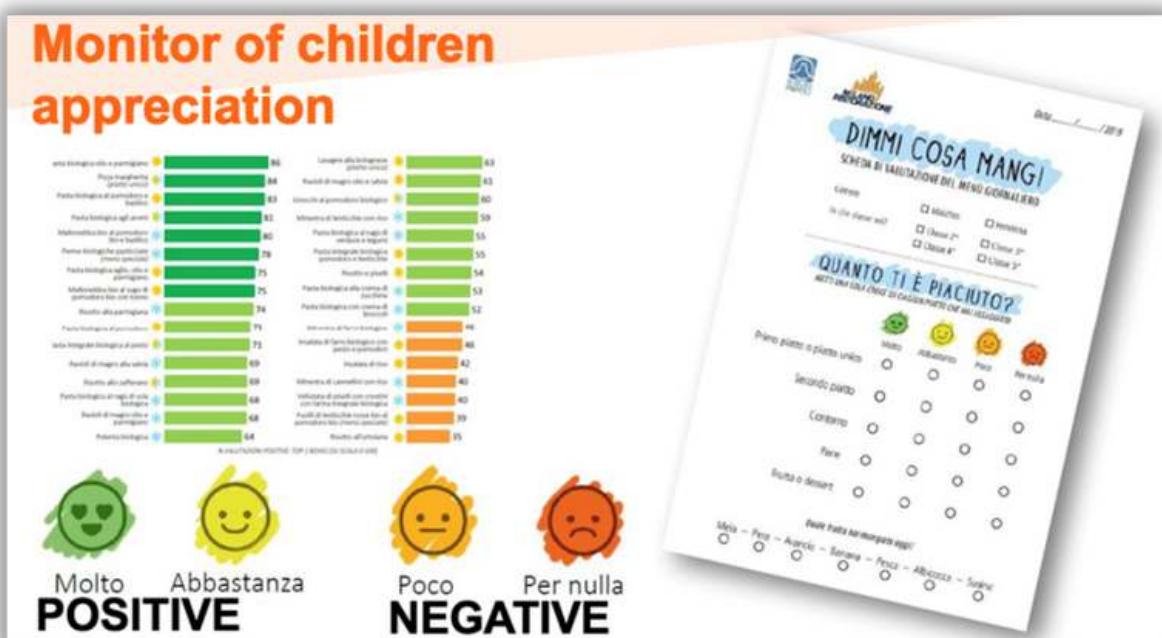
Following the launch of Milan's Food Policy in 2015, the city has been working with a variety of actors ranging from researchers to the private sector, NGOs, and other public institutions. The goal was to innovate the food system, starting with public services managed by the municipality.

As of today, 85.000 meals are prepared and delivered daily in more than 400 canteens, which serve all of Milan's children.

Since the start of the project, pilot activities in classrooms, such as the promotion of fruit consumption, have been implemented, along with monitoring to understand the effects of such consumption interventions.

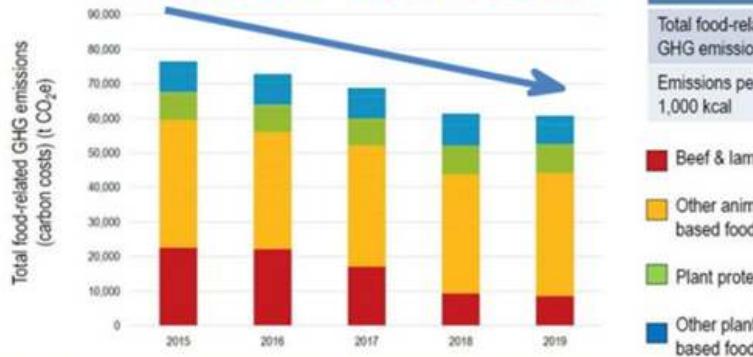
This approach also aims to gradually shift public procurement towards more plant-based diets by substituting poultry for beef and pork and increasing the quantity of legumes. Overall, the project has **already cut 20% of total food-related GHG emissions** in 5 years, proving that the target of reducing food-related emissions by 40% by 2030 is achievable.

Andrea Magarini is confident that this downward trend will continue in the coming years with the maintenance of activities and the participation of families and other sectors. Monitoring is also an important part of this approach in order to benchmark and understand children's appreciation of the meals



School canteens public procurement food-related GHG emission (2015-19)

-15.721 Ton CO₂e



Source: Provided by member.

COOL FOOD
DELICIOUS CLIMATE ACTION

SESSION 2: WHAT ARE NUTRITIONALLY HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE MEALS FOR SCHOOLCHILDREN?

Perrine Nadaud, PhD, MSc | French Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health & Safety (Anses)

Simulated Impact of Vegetarian School Meal Frequency: A French Experiment

Since the introduction of legislation in France requiring at least one vegetarian menu per week, Anses has simulated the impact of vegetarian school meal frequency on the nutritional intakes of primary-school children based on multiple available databases.

The vegetarian menus were divided into three categories: egg-based, cheese-based, and plant-based, which included pulses, soybeans, grains, or vegetables.

Overall, the simulation results showed that the percentage of dietary reference values varied between menus without meat or fish.

Dietary reference values for EPA +DHA (long-chain fatty acids) and vitamin D decreased and remain below that reference, while vitamin B12, B3, B6, and zinc decreased while always remaining above the dietary reference values. For other nutrients, the dietary reference values stayed stable and above those values.



Assuming that, outside of school lunches, children eat animal products, the simulation shows that the intake of bioavailable iron is sufficient even if a vegetarian menu is consumed during all of the child's school lunches, regardless of the type of vegetarian menu.



LIMITS AND CONCLUSIONS

- The introduction of a variable proportion (from 0 to 100%) of vegetarian meals does not substantially change the nutritional status of children
 - maximum frequency does not seem relevant
- Menus with fish are important contributors of EPA and DHA and of vitamin D, whose intake is insufficient
 - Pay particular attention to the frequency of menus with fish, important contributors of EPA and DHA and vitamin D
- The other components of the meal can also be decisive in terms of the intake of certain nutrients (Ca, B12, iodine)
 - Recommended frequencies of vegetarian meals should consider the combinations of menu components in order to optimize nutritional balance
- Analysis based on simulations and average intake
 - Need for more accurate data allowing to consider specific sub-populations according to real consumption, intake outside school meals, socio-economic status, etc.

Further reading: [Anses recommendations on vegetarian school menus](#)

Marianne Sabinsky, PhD | Danish Veterinary and Food Administration

Dietary Guidelines for Meals in schools – good for health and climate



The Dietary Guidelines for Meals is a tool to translate the Danish Dietary Guidelines into the design of school menus, to provide meals that are beneficial for both health and the environment.

Marianne Sabinsky explained how the guidelines operate, for instance allowing to convert food categories and their recommended frequency of consumption into specific foods that can in turn be combined to form healthy and environmentally friendly meals.

The guide also includes recommendations on portion sizes. In this way, the guidelines provide comprehensive support to translate knowledge about sustainable diets into the design of school meals.

Principles for schools

These are the principles for a healthy and climate-friendly diet, and how you can translate these into 5 meals. You can choose to offer a food-item more often and use a smaller amount in the meals (see portions sizes). See also 'More about food in schools and canteens'.



Water
Offer water for all meals

Tip
Use leftovers – and avoid food waste

| Vegetables and fruits | Legumes, fish, meat and egg | Cereals and potatoes | Fats, nuts and seeds | Dairy product and cheese |
|--|---|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Min. 1/3 of all meals should consist of vegetables and/or fruits Remember the dark green vegetables | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer less meat – and remember fish Offer legumes more often than meat | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Choose primarily whole grain Vary with potatoes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use most often plantbased oils Add nuts and seeds | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use dairy products and cheese in moderate amounts |
| Vegetables and/or fruits of different colours (4 of 5) | Legumes (2 of 5) | Wholegrain products (at least 4 of 5) | Vary with potatoes | Plantbased oils or products of plantbased oils (3-4 of 5) |
| | Fish (1 of 5) | | | Add nuts (1-2 of 5) |
| | Meat (1 of 5) | | | Add seeds (1-2 of 5) |
| Dark green vegetables (1 of 5) | Egg or others (1 of 5) | Products with less or no wholegrain (max 1 of 5) | Butter/solid fat (max 1 of 5) | Dairy products (2-3 of 5) Max 1 product with more fat |
| | | | | Cheese (1-2 of 5) |

Portion sizes in schools

Lunch – prepared amounts (g per meal)



| | 8 years Little portion/1600 kJ | | | 12 years Standard portion/2000 kJ | | |
|--|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| | Warm lunch meal | Cold lunch meal | | Warm lunch meal | Cold lunch meal | |
| Vegetable/fruit | At least 100 g At least 70 g** | At least 60 g | | At least 120 g At least 90 g** | At least 70 g | |
| Potatoe/potatoe/potato or bread | 120-150 g 60-90 g | 70-90 g | | 150-200 g 75-110 g | 90-110 g | |
| Legumes/produce*** or Fish or Meat or Egg | 50-60 g 60 g 50 g 40-50 g | 30-40 g 40 g 30 g 25 g | Per ½ slice/bread 15 g 15 g 15 g 12 g | 60-70 g 70 g 60 g 50-60 g | 40-50 g 50 g 40 g 30-40 g | Per ½ slice/bread 20 g 20 g 15 g 15 g |
| Vegetable oils and products or Solid fats, e.g. butter**** | 5-8 g 5-4 g | 5-8 g 5-4 g | | 5-10 g 5-3 g | 5-10 g 5-3 g | |
| Nuts | 5-6 g | 5-6 g | | 5-10 g | 5-10 g | |
| Seeds (incl. seeds in bread) | 2-4 g | 2-4 g | | 3-8 g | 3-8 g | |
| Cheese | 5-10 g | 5-15 g | | 5-15 g | 5-20 g | |
| Dairy products for cooking, e.g. sauce, soups or dressing | 20-30 g | 20-30 g | | 25-35 g | 25-35 g | |

Appropriate portion sizes

The school children should have portions for lunch which are big enough to make them full. Some eat a little more and some a little less. These four portions sizes should be considered indicative.



*You can add 5-15 g more meat in 1 of 5 sandwiches.

**In meals with many legumes

***Use the lowest part of the interval when you only use legumes and the highest when legumes is mixed with flour, egg, nuts etc.

****Use the lowest part of the interval when you use plant oils and the highest when you use a product based on vegetable oils, e.g. mayonnaise, pesto.

Further readings:

- Official Dietary Guidelines of Denmark (in English)
- Kostråd til Måltider



Fostering nutritious and climate friendly diets through optimised school meals

Patricia Eustachio Colombo described the results of three intervention studies carried out in real-life settings testing the acceptability of new school lunch menus.

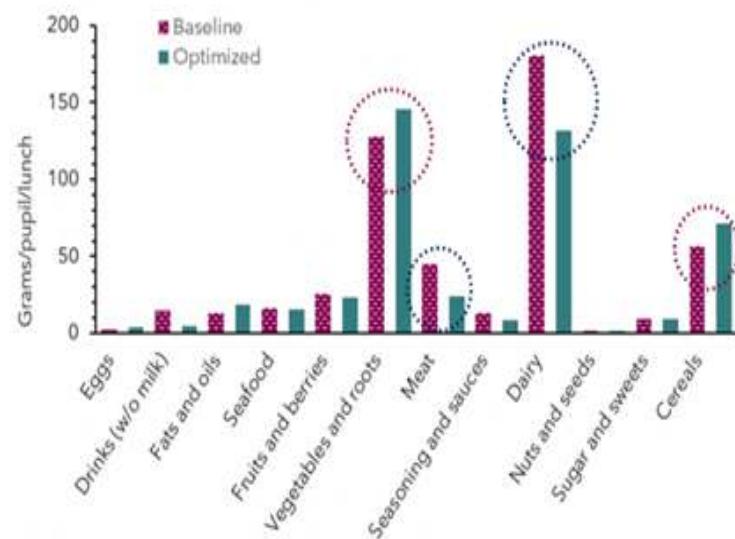


"School meals can shape dietary habits in a way that is both health-promoting and environmentally sustainable".

These new menus were optimised to be as similar as possible to baseline menus, while meeting dietary reference values, containing about 500g CO₂eq per day to match guidance of the World Wildlife Fund, and without increasing costs.

Outcomes

- No significant change in food waste, consumption or school meal satisfaction



The outcomes showed that despite the lower quantity of meat and dairy and higher quantity of vegetables served, the new menus did not lead to significant changes in food waste, consumption, or school meal satisfaction. Overall, the menus and dishes stayed the same and were omnivorous, but the proportion of food groups within recipes shifted towards more plant-based products.

How do we scale up successfully?

- More knowledge, resources and inspiration
- Increased involvement of stakeholders
- Focusing on familiar foods and seasoning/naming dishes carefully
- Increasing exposure and normalization
- Developing automated tools for meal planning

Further reading:

Eustachio Colombo, P., et al. (2020). The importance of school lunches to the overall dietary intake of children in Sweden: A nationally representative study. *Public Health Nutrition*, 23(10)

Agneta Hörnell, Prof. | Umeå University, Sweden & European Federation of the Associations of Dietitians (EFAD)

Reflections on healthy and sustainable diets

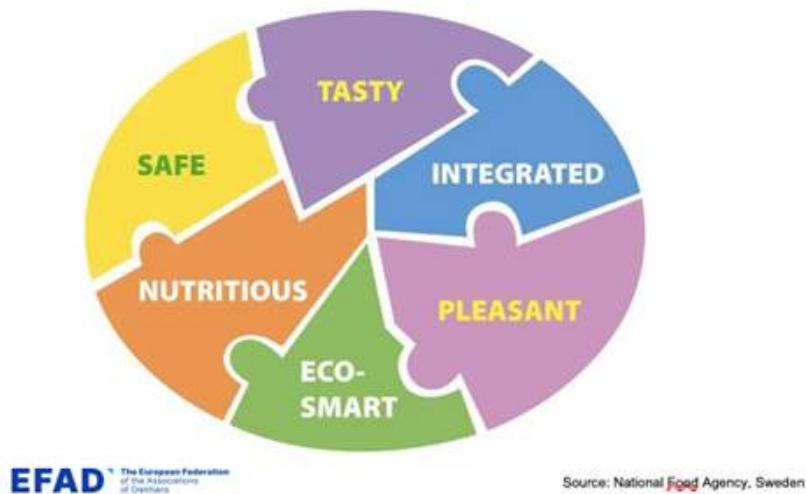
Agneta Hörnell emphasised the need for a holistic approach to school meals and sustainability, that does not only focus on the nutritional and environmental dimensions.

Agneta emphasised several important additional factors and considerations, such as:

- The importance to consider portion sizes;
- Staff must be knowledgeable and follow food safety regulations;
- Pupils on special diets due to allergies or intolerances should be able to eat the food without fear of becoming ill;
- Meals should be tasty and attractive – if they aren't, they will not be eaten;
- Meals should be planned in accordance with the needs and desires of the pupils. It is critical that children participate in meal planning and naming;
- The meals should be integrated into the initiative's pedagogical mission and used as a teaching tool;
- The meals should be a pleasant place for students and staff to meet;
- Meals should be eco-friendly, including in the sense of minimising food waste from cooking and serving, and they should be chosen with the environment and animal welfare in mind.



Swedish model for public meals



Further reading:

[EFAD Position Paper Sustainable Dietary Patterns \(2021\)](#)

SESSION 3: HOW TO ACCELERATE THE UPTAKE OF HEALTHY, SUSTAINABLE MEALS IN EUROPEAN SCHOOLS?

Elin Sandström | Swedish Food Agency & European Public Health Nutrition Alliance (EPHNA)

School meals as a recipe to transform the food system

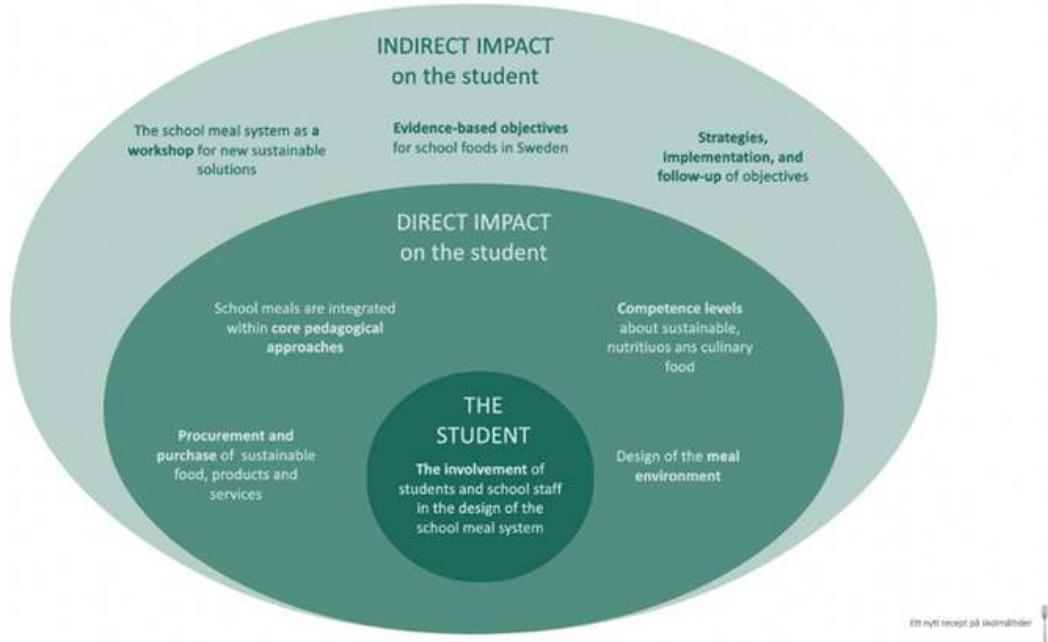


"In order to achieve the SDGs, the food system must change so that we can produce, buy, and eat healthy, sustainable food. When looking at the food system, many entry points are linked to school meals."

"As a result, the school meal system can be viewed as a small-scale version of the entire food system that can be used as leverage."

"A new recipe for school meals" is a collaborative project in Sweden that aims to design and implement more sustainable school meals. The Swedish school meals system provides excellent opportunities because it serves as a platform for people to connect during their upbringing, it fosters engagement, and involves everyone.

As a result, new methods, techniques, and norms can be tested. Small changes to the system can have a significant impact. These are the starting points for innovative projects, and it is critical that more schools and municipalities take these steps in order to create more opportunities for change. When all system actors collaborate, they can break down silos and use each other's competencies and knowledge of the system to ensure that further steps are taken and the project is accelerated.



More resources:

- [Good practices of healthy schoolmeals](#), European Public Health Nutrition Alliance (EPHNA)
- [School meals as a recipe to transform food systems](#) (video)

Mojca Gabrijelčič Blenkuš, Dr. Assist. Prof. | National Institute of Public Health, Slovenia (NIJZ)

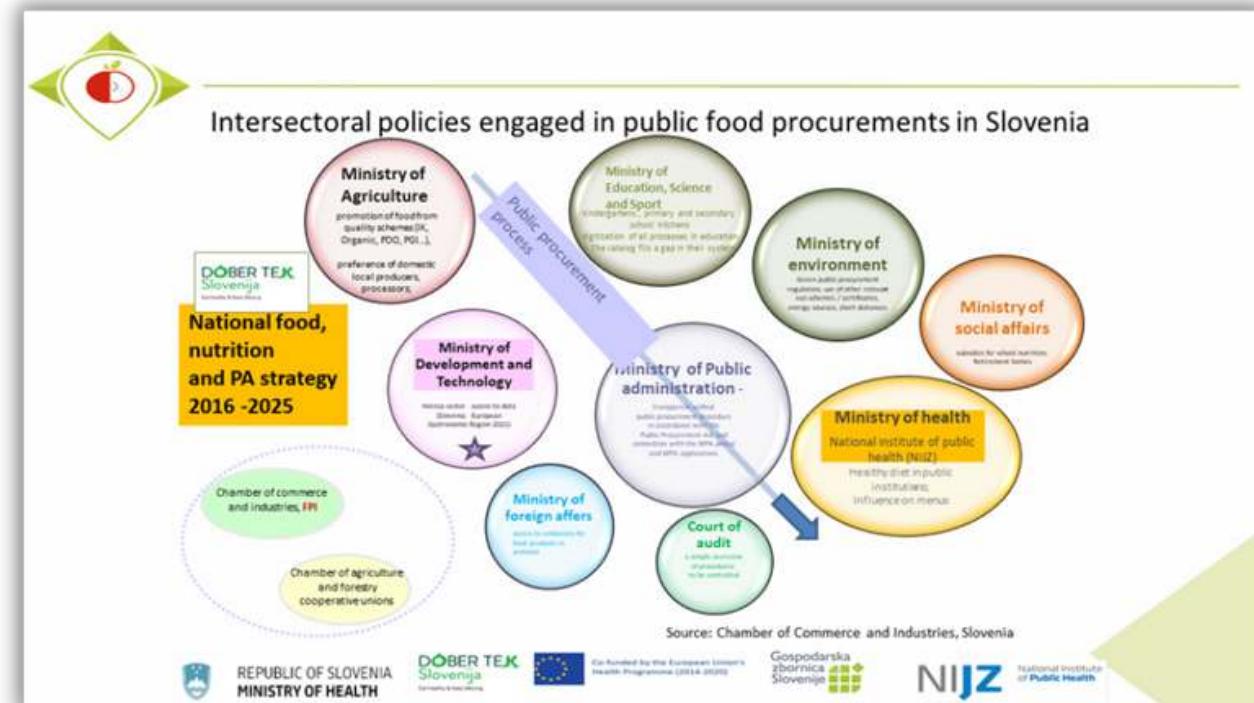
Joint Action Best- ReMaP: WP7 - Public procurement of food in public institutions: a pilot EU approach

The public procurement workstream of Joint Action Best-ReMaP, coordinated by the National Institute of Public Health of Slovenia, aims to test and pilot best practices that can provide high-quality, healthy, and nutritious food to every public institution in the EU.

The public procurement process is part of a large, complex picture that includes multiple sectors and cross-ministry actions. So far, new approaches have been piloted in seven Member States.



Despite their promising nature, there are still many hurdles to be overcome in terms of ensuring cooperation between the different actors involved.



This project is also working on a food catalogue, which is an automated tool that would facilitate the creation of a menu that adheres to sustainable dietary guidelines and other requirements, such as the share of products purchased from quality schemes.

More information:

- Joint Action Best-Remap: [Procurement of nutritious food in public institutions](#)
- <https://www.katalogzivil.si/>

Wim Debeuckelaere | European Commission, DG SANTE, Farm to Fork Unit



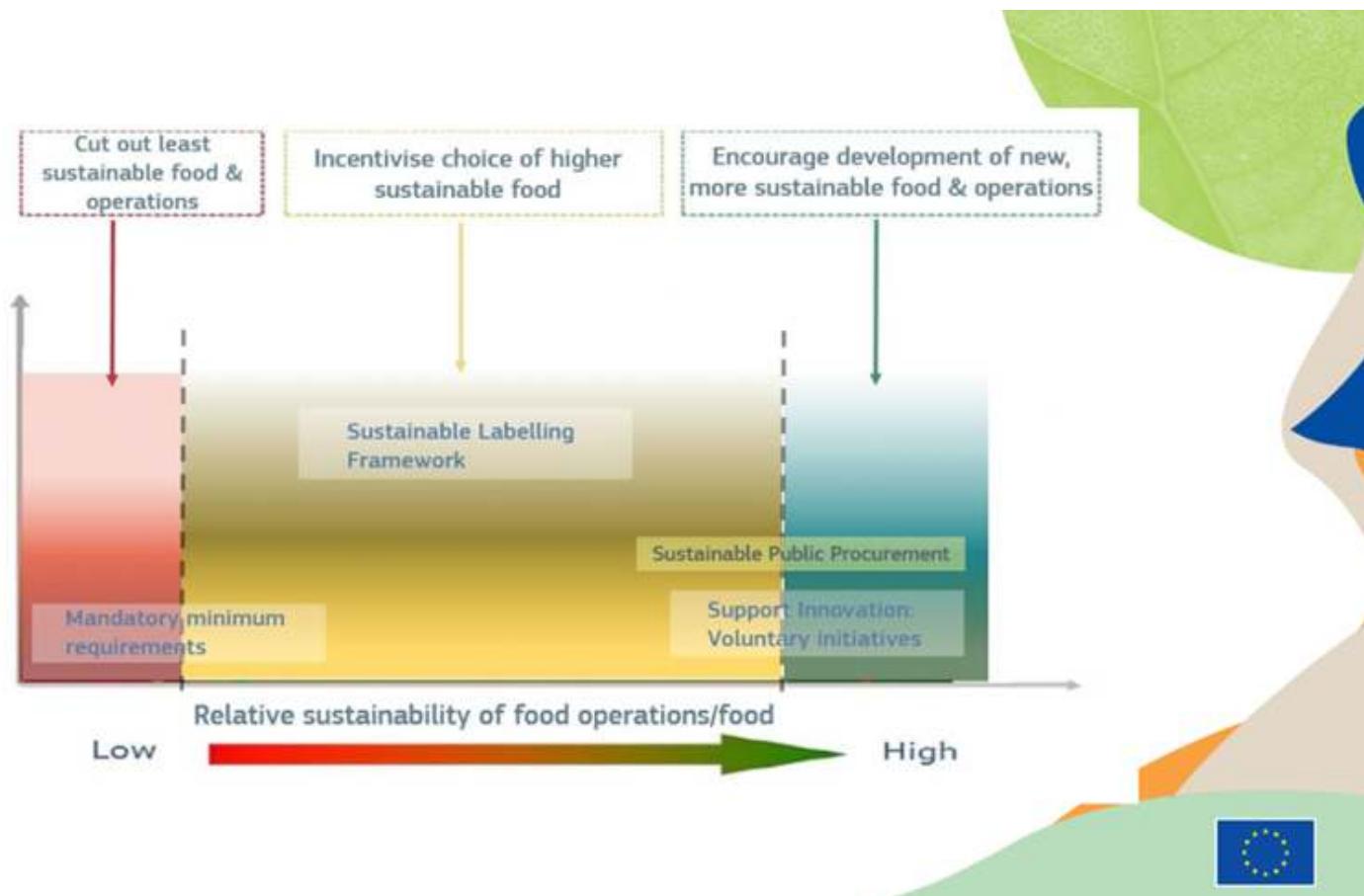
Minimum mandatory criteria for sustainable food procurement

In 2020 the European Commission launched the Farm to Fork strategy with the aim of creating a fair, healthy, and environmentally-friendly EU food system.

Twenty-seven actions have been announced, including the introduction of new legislative proposals, revisions to existing legislation, and revisions of other legislations and actions plans.



Various pieces of legislation exist that address some aspects of food sustainability, however, there is no dedicated EU framework law on food sustainability that aims to ensure that all foods placed on the EU market become more sustainable through a socially responsible food value chain.



Given the importance of sustainable public procurement, the Commission has already stated in the Farm to Fork strategy that it will determine the best way to set minimum mandatory criteria for sustainable food procurement in order to assist public authorities in promoting sustainable farming and diets.

The Commission is aware that strategic procurement opportunities are underutilised when it comes to making public procurement work in Europe. In the context of the upcoming proposal of the Legislative framework for sustainable food systems, the Commission will be launching a public consultation in the next period which will also cover input on how to enable better public procurement across the EU.

Further reading:

- European Commission: [Farm to Fork strategy](#)



Marie-Cecile Rouillon | European Commission Coordinator on the Rights of the Child

EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child: ensuring at least one healthy meal each school day for children in need

Inspired by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child aims to ensure that children receive adequate nutrition and are exposed to conditions enabling good health.

Ensuring good school meals for children is critical, especially for children at risk of poverty, because they provide an important source of quality nutrition.



"Across almost all Member States, on average, 20% of children reported not eating breakfast before going to school, and those children were more likely to come from low-income families."

Given that children from the most vulnerable groups suffer most from the lack of access to nutritious meals, it is critical that food and nutrition is truly integrated into how we define children's rights. A concrete example of how this can be done is the EU Child Guarantee, through which Member States are encouraged to provide at least one healthy meal per school day to children in need.

Member States are also encouraged to allocate adequate resources to combat child poverty, particularly those Member States where child poverty rates are higher than the EU average. In those MSs where child AROPE rate was above the EU average, this appropriate amount shall be at least 5% of their ESF+ national envelope.

Clearly, however, European funds alone will not be sufficient to fully deliver on the Child Guarantee, and thus Member States are invited to indicate what additional resources they will be committing to these aims in their national action plans.

Further reading:

- European Commission: [European Child Guarantee](#)

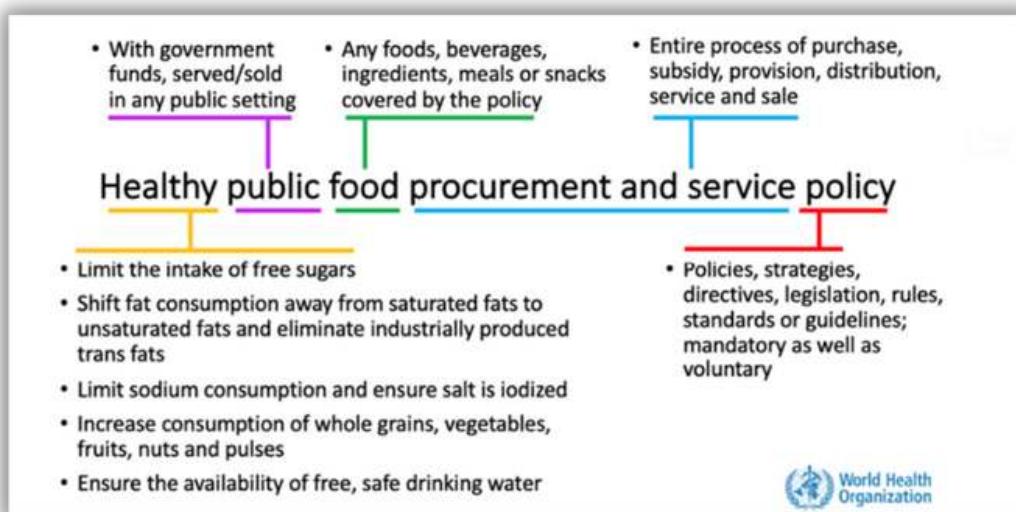


Healthy and sustainable food procurement



Good nutrition is essential for the success of all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A comprehensive approach is required to promoting healthy diets, including through a better use of public food procurement.

For this reason, the WHO has produced a comprehensive guide for developing public procurement policies. It is based on the principle that public institutions should lead by example and influence behaviour change.



Next, the WHO is working on a manual to inspire and enable procurement officers across the European region to tailor their procurement practices to enable healthy and sustainable meals



CONTACT

Nikolai Pushkarev

Senior Policy Manager for Healthy Environments

nikolai.pushkarev@epha.org



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