

Eating City - Position Paper

“The Italian school canteen as a common good - post Covid-19”

English translation by Robin Gourlay - Original Italian version by Maurizio Mariani



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Introduction - The social role of the school canteen in Italy

Employment and economic polarization is widespread in the world today and the distance between social classes is increasing. The role of the school canteen will be increasingly important in the severe economic crisis that is looming post Covid-19.

Since its inception in the 1960s, the school canteen has offered a safe and balanced meal to all children in nursery, primary and secondary schools, guaranteeing equality of access to food and nutrition. Now more than ever, it is vital that attention must be paid to what our children eat and what the school food service can deliver.

In the current Covid pandemic we can judge that our immune system is the first major defense against the virus. Recent observations and scientific research have highlighted a correlation between air pollution and the spread of the Covid-19 virus itself, especially in large urban centers where the population density is higher. The situation further compounded by three other public health emergencies typical of our time, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and obesity. In short, "Man is what he eats" and I may add "man is what he decides to be through his lifestyle" - his eating habits strongly affect his state of health. Health [through food and diet] has a strong impact on the whole economic and social system.

We consider it useful to underline that food choices have been considered as the preserve of individual choice. Historically the political realm could not and did not want to intervene. Unfortunately too often without guidance or societal intervention a child brought up in an obesogenic home with an obese father or mother itself was likely also to become obese, not because of genetics, but because of perpetuating "bad habits in life" – such as lack of exercise, sedentary lifestyle and poor nutrition.

In Europe, (not only) since the second half of the 1990s there has been a disruption of the food distribution chain, resulting from what I call food Fordism: "everything, always and immediately" - let me explain better.

Our daily food.

From the professional experience of the writer - and as can be seen from reading the financial statements of the major catering companies in Italy and their main suppliers - a new player in the food supply chain has emerged in this period, the so-called "Middle Man"; i.e. food logistics operators and wholesalers that allow the various commercial catering companies to concentrate their purchases and benefit from economies of scale on the costs of logistics and supply chain management. Through this new player, the availability of food "everything, always and immediately" is guaranteed; the pity is that it does not add any value to the product and, to the contrary, captures a considerable economic margin, thus becoming the driver of the supply chain itself. From this point on, if we want a fair and sustainable food system - we are lost.

In the school meals sector we would like to stress that the responsibility for this weighs both the contract criteria used for school meals and the performance of catering companies. Many school kitchens have been closed and instead industrial factory kitchens have been created that cook tens of thousands of meals a day, or to be precise, that "assemble meals". In these places skilled cooks are on the verge of extinction, very often starting from pre-processed products, which once "assembled" are transported to individual schools, mainly in hot multi-portion containers and held a time waiting for service to the children and young people. The moral of the story is that a good part of the meal, which inevitably has largely lost its appeal and nutritional quality ends up in the dustbin.

While we continue to import food and "organic" products from all over the world, it is to the detriment of small local producers who even if not able to offer the enormous quantities required by the "Fordista" approach to collective catering, would undoubtedly be able to offer wholesome fresh or naturally preserved products of local provenance

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Indeed if society continues to accept as a norm that food is just another "commodity" and the school catering service as foremost a commercial "utility"; then echoing the words of French President Macron in his first message to the nation for the Covid-19 emergency " as well as for health care, our daily food has to get out of the logic of the market, ".

The industrialization of the school food service, has enslaved it to the concept of the lowest price, frequently masked behind the concept of "economically more advantageous offer". So, we arrive at pre-covid19 with the canteen service is in an inexorable if gradual degradation; at least until the famous sandwich strike that saw in many Italian cities facing a type of social revolution that still today has resulted in many children resorting to bring their lunch from home instead.

In contrast to the "food Fordism" mentioned above, some Italian municipalities with courageous choices have and are still reversing the trend. Mixed management solutions between public and private, as in the case of the city of Cremona or as in the case of the public company "Qualità e Servizi" of Sesto Fiorentino, which has built a real food community around the canteen, inspired by the principles of Slow Food, it shows that it can be done better and that sustainability is not accessory, but a pillar of the new.

Key facts & figures of social foodservices in Italy.

At a European level, social foodservices serve more than 80 million meals a day. In Italy, the entire social foodservices sector has a turnover of around 7 billion and employs more than 150,000 people. The prevalence of the market is under contract (about 65% of the total) and employs about 90 thousand people, of which the school sector employs about 41% of the total. The majority of the workforce is represented by women in the 35-49 age group.

Governance and accountability of the service

The decision on how to manage the school canteen service in the emergency phase of the covid-19 cannot fail to take into account the preliminary assessments made so far and the unfortunate possibility that a similar emergency may continue for a long time or recur in the years to come. Today we are called upon to manage the emergency, but we must also think about making the system resilient in order to be able to meet the challenges that arise.

Citizens, parents, teachers and all those involved must be informed about the actions taken and it is precisely the concept of accountability that we are calling for. Specifically, we refer to the duty on the part of decision-makers, both public and private, to be accountable to citizens for the choices made, the results obtained and their consequences. This principle gives the community the right to be informed about decisions, to criticise them and to have answers from decision-makers. Decisions and the reasons for them should be made public, so that there is space for communication, criticism and discussion.

The school canteen as a common good

The school cafeteria must be considered in all respects a common good and not just any utility.

From the point of view of legal analysis, food can easily fall under the category of common good. The definition referred to is taken from Italian jurisprudence and corresponds to that provided by the Rodotà Commission which, distinguishing between public, private and common goods, described the latter as those goods which meet two requirements: they express functional utilities for the exercise of the fundamental rights of the person as well as for his free development and are, therefore, goods whose collective, direct and universal fruition must be guaranteed by law in such a way as to take into account the interests of future generations.

Italy is a country that boasts a gastronomic tradition unique in the world and an agro-food chain of excellence, it is also the country of welcome and hospitality, all factors that contribute to the wealth of the country through the development of tourism and care for the land. Coming generations must be able to understand that all this is part of the intangible heritage of our country and what better time is there to spread this culture than lunch at school and the educational opportunity to instill this?

We must not forget how important our diet is and how this is our first medicine, a fundamental pillar for the prevention of many diseases and for the raising of our immune defences, investing in lunch at school is equivalent to investing in the future of the country and making cities rural communities more resilient.

Conclusions.

In conclusion, both during the Covid-19 crisis and after it is feasible to reconfigure this vital public catering service that, in terms of numbers and economy, does not cost more than the average value of the prevailing contracts or the internalized management of the same. It is conceivable to provide a service that allows schoolchildren to be fed with healthy and tasty food, respecting a good nutritional balance, allowing them to eat lunch in class through the administration of lunch boxes produced in specific cooking centers or in the kitchens of schools where they are present; using in extremis, limited to the emergency phase, compostable disposable containers and cutlery in order to ensure hygiene and food safety and a fair level of comfort for children. In this way, school canteen workers and catering companies, both public and private, can be protected. Certainly the autonomy of the schools and the agreements with the various municipalities, whose approaches are currently so different from each other, does not lend itself to a prescriptive implementation a single management system. Each municipality is different from the other and this diversity is the first richness of a territorial and resilient food system.

However, a base line service - of for example a single cold dish- is not necessary nor an acceptable response in this Covid crisis stage or going forward. Much more is possible and much more is needed.

The Foodinsider Expert Task Force set up spontaneously and active around the Platform demonstrates that there is a high degree of concern, interest and expectation across society; politically we need your support and direction to harness the knowledge, leadership and the resource capacity of the various local authorities that are already active in the territories to deliver a better school food system.

We ask that the Ministry of Education take a clear and precise position on the fact that the canteen service must continue, as before and better than before, especially post Covid when it will be a vitally important social service. We remain at your complete disposal to go into more detail, putting all our national and international experience in the collective catering sector at your disposal, in order to increase the resilience of the "school canteen" system.

I would like to close this paper on school foodservices with a quote from Martin Luther King who has shaped my professional life as a manager and consultant over the last 30 years:

"You may not be responsible for the situation you're in, but you will be if you do nothing to change it."

My best regards

Maurizio Mariani

Director

Eating City International Platform

Tel 0033 6 19165878

m.mariani@eatingcity.org

www.eatingcity.org

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