

# From Policy to Plate

## Advancing Healthy, Sustainable and Just Public Food Procurement in the EU



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## Foreword

Public procurement, particularly in food systems, stands at the crossroads of economic strategy, sustainability imperatives, and social justice. Once regarded as a mere administrative function, procurement has evolved into one of the most potent instruments available to governments in shaping national economies, fostering innovation, and **advancing green transitions**. Yet, the landscape within which procurement policies operate is increasingly shaped by global financial paradigms that dictate how states allocate resources, prioritize sustainability and equity, and negotiate the boundaries between public responsibility and private investment.

Over the past decades, the “Washington Consensus” laid the foundations for widespread economic liberalization, pushing for market efficiency and privatization as guiding principles. This paradigm has since evolved into what Daniela Gabor describes as the “Wall Street Consensus”, where state functions — such as food security, infrastructure, and environmental policies — are restructured to attract private capital, de-risk financial investments, and create new asset classes in traditionally public domains.

Public procurement is not immune to this shift. While European policies such as the Farm to Fork Strategy and Green Public Procurement Guidelines seek to institutionalize sustainability within food systems, their implementation is increasingly shaped by financial structures that favor large-scale corporate investment over decentralized, community-led solutions. This has profound implications: procurement decisions are no longer exclusively determined by nutritional, social, or environmental priorities but by financial viability as perceived by investors.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Beijing Consensus offers a contrasting vision — one in which the state retains strategic control over key sectors, using procurement as a tool to fortify national industries and food security. China’s model prioritizes **state-led investment** in food supply chains, supporting domestic agricultural production through subsidies and direct market interventions. Unlike the financialized European model, this approach emphasizes sovereignty over supply chains, ensuring that sustainability transitions serve national interests rather than global capital markets. In fact, the Beijing Consensus understands food security and self-sufficiency as matters of national security itself: meeting the renewed demands of the Chinese consumers is key to socioeconomic stability and essential to the legitimacy itself of Chinese government.

The European Green Deal, originally conceived as a transformative policy to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, illustrates the tension between these models. In its initial iteration (2019), the Green Deal emphasized regulatory frameworks, legally binding sustainability targets, and direct public investment in green transitions. However, its revised version (2024), influenced by the Draghi Report on EU Competitiveness, increasingly leans towards financialization — advocating for private capital mobilization, relaxed regulations, and investment de-risking strategies similar to those promoted by the Wall Street Consensus. This shift means that while sustainability remains a central objective, the mechanisms to achieve it now heavily rely on financial engineering, rather than direct government intervention and robust regulatory enforcement.

In this context, public food procurement is both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge lies in resisting the pressure to frame procurement as merely a market transaction, dictated by cost-efficiency

and investor expectations. The opportunity, however, is immense: procurement can be a lever for systemic transformation, prioritizing agroecology, local food systems, and social equity. Success stories, such as Copenhagen's organic public food model or the Dordogne initiative combining local, organic, fresh, and home-style cooking, demonstrate that a procurement model designed around public interest rather than financial gain is possible.

This policy paper argues that governments must reclaim procurement as a strategic policy instrument - one that aligns with the public good, rather than market imperatives. To do so, it proposes key policy shifts:

- Transitioning from voluntary sustainability criteria to legally binding ones, ensuring that procurement aligns with measurable environmental and social outcomes.
- Strengthening public procurement networks to enable knowledge-sharing and best practices across Europe.
- Investing in local and regional food systems, reducing reliance on globalized supply chains that prioritize cost reduction over sustainability and resilience.
- Ensuring financial transparency and accountability, preventing the capture of sustainability funds by large financial actors whose primary interest is return on investment rather than ecological and social well-being.

As Europe navigates the complex interplay between **state-led transitions and financialized sustainability**, public procurement will be at the forefront of determining **whether the Green Deal fulfills its original mission or becomes another opportunity for capital markets**. This paper serves as a call to action, urging policymakers to ensure that public spending remains a tool for social progress, climate resilience, and food justice, rather than a mechanism for de-risking private investments.

Public procurement is no longer an isolated **administrative function**; it is a powerful **geopolitical tool**. The ability of governments to **shape food systems through procurement policies** will determine their capacity to respond to **future crises, ensure food sovereignty, and maintain economic resilience**. As the EU refines its **Green Deal and Farm to Fork Strategy**, it must ensure that procurement serves not only **sustainability and public health objectives** but also the **long-term geopolitical stability of its food system**.

The transition towards **sustainable public food procurement must therefore be integrated into the EU's broader geopolitical strategy**, ensuring that food policies are resilient against market shocks, trade disruptions, and financial manipulation. **Only by balancing environmental, social, and geopolitical considerations can public procurement truly serve as a pillar of a just and sustainable food system**.

# 1. Introduction

Public procurement is not merely a technical process but a strategic policy tool that governments and local authorities can leverage to drive sustainability, innovation, and social impact. With €2 trillion spent annually across the EU, procurement decisions significantly shape markets, influence food systems, and support environmental and social objectives. Even a 1% efficiency improvement could generate savings of €20 billion per year, underscoring the economic and transformative potential of procurement reforms.

A crucial step in this direction is the newly launched Expert Group on Public Procurement (SEGPP) by the European Commission. This group plays a pivotal role in advising the Commission on public procurement policies, ensuring alignment with EU market objectives and sustainability goals. The task of the expert group is to develop legal, economic, and technical frameworks that enhance the effectiveness of procurement, making it a driver of green and socially responsible transitions. Betina Bergmann Madsen's participation brings first-hand experience from Copenhagen's green procurement strategy, contributing to EU-wide best practices and policy innovation.

Governments must integrate sustainability, circular economy principles, and social equity into procurement policies. Successful models demonstrate that systemic change is possible through targeted procurement, supplier engagement, and regulatory frameworks.

Copenhagen's model, which ensures 90% organic food in public institutions, and Dordogne's approach, emphasizing local, organic, fresh, and home-style cooking, showcase how strategic public procurement can transform food systems.

Another pioneering example is East Ayrshire, Scotland, which has been at the forefront of sustainable public food procurement since 2006. By prioritizing fresh, local, and organic ingredients, engaging small-scale farmers, and integrating sustainability into school meal contracts, East Ayrshire has demonstrated how procurement can drive healthier diets, stronger local economies, and environmental benefits. This initiative has influenced national policy and serves as a blueprint for other regions.

Sustainable food procurement is a direct investment in public health and the well-being of future generations. By embedding sustainability into procurement strategies, governments can leverage public spending to create food systems that are both resilient and socially just.

For public procurement to effectively contribute to sustainability goals, several key actions are necessary:

- First, procurement criteria must transition from voluntary guidelines to binding, performance-based standards that ensure supplier accountability and drive long-term impact. It is also crucial to distinguish between procurement processes used to contract service providers to deliver public food services, and those used to purchase food products directly. These are distinct procurement mechanisms, each requiring tailored sustainability criteria.

- Second, public procurement networks should be strengthened to facilitate knowledge-sharing and capacity-building among EU member states and local governments. Collaboration across these networks can support the adoption of best practices in sustainable food procurement, whether for contracting food service providers or purchasing food directly.
- Third, investment in training programs is essential to equip procurement officers with practical tools to implement sustainable purchasing strategies effectively. This includes fostering strong collaboration between procurement officers, caterers, and nutritionists in menu and recipe development. Without clear sustainability requirements embedded in menus and food service contracts, sustainable food will not be procured. A multidisciplinary approach—integrating procurement expertise with nutritional and culinary know-how — is vital to ensure that public food services align with sustainability and health objectives.

The future of procurement policy lies in scaling up proven models, harmonizing green criteria across the EU, and reinforcing procurement’s role as a lever for economic resilience, environmental sustainability, and public health. Governments and local authorities must embrace procurement not just as a financial transaction, but as a powerful mechanism for systemic change — one that fosters innovation, climate action, and inclusive growth. Public spending must become a catalyst for transformation, ensuring that sustainability commitments are not just ambitions but realities embedded in every contract and every tender across Europe.

## 2. The Regulatory Landscape: A Foundation for Change

To drive sustainability in public food procurement, the EU has established a set of guiding regulations and policies. Directive 2014/24/EU lays the groundwork by ensuring transparency and fair competition while allowing for sustainability criteria to be embedded in purchasing decisions. The EU’s Green Public Procurement Guidelines, introduced in 2019, provide voluntary but influential benchmarks for eco-friendly food purchasing. Meanwhile, the Farm to Fork Strategy, launched in 2020, emphasizes the importance of leveraging procurement to make sustainable and healthy diets the norm rather than the exception. Social considerations, including fair trade and worker rights, have also gained prominence under the Social Procurement Guidelines introduced in 2021. These policies collectively form a framework that, if properly utilized, can push the EU toward a healthier and more sustainable food system.

## 3. Bringing Sustainability into Public Procurement

### 3.1 Environmental Considerations: Beyond Cost and Convenience

Public institutions have a responsibility to procure food in a way that protects the planet. Prioritizing organic and integrated farming practices can safeguard biodiversity while reducing reliance on harmful chemicals. Reducing food waste is another critical step, which requires better monitoring systems and redistribution efforts to ensure that surplus food is not simply discarded. Additionally, public procurement policies should favor food with a lower carbon footprint by sourcing local and seasonal produce and minimizing long transportation distances.

### 3.2 Social and Economic Benefits: More Than Food on a Plate

Food procurement is not only about filling plates — it is about shaping food supply chains that are fair and ethical. Public procurement should insist on fair trade certification for products like coffee, cocoa, and bananas, ensuring that farmers receive fair wages and work in safe conditions. Meanwhile, animal welfare considerations should be built into purchasing decisions by prioritizing cage-free eggs and pasture-raised livestock. Supporting local economies is also vital, and while EU competition laws limit the ability to mandate local sourcing outright, procurement policies can still be structured in ways that favor regional food systems, benefiting small-scale farmers and fostering resilience in local supply chains.

### 3.3 The Role of Nutrition and Prevention in Public Health

Public food procurement must also take into account the health of the populations it serves. Ensuring adherence to national dietary guidelines can improve nutrition standards across public institutions, from schools to hospitals and elderly care facilities. Given the rising ageing population in the EU, procurement policies should prioritize nutritionally balanced meals that support healthy ageing, including diets rich in protein, fiber, and essential vitamins. Increasing the presence of plant-based meals can be a win-win, offering both environmental and health benefits. At the same time, procurement policies should set clear limits on salt, sugar, and saturated fat in meals, steering clear of highly processed foods and prioritizing fresh, wholesome ingredients. **A stronger focus on preventive health strategies through food procurement can help mitigate risks associated with non-communicable diseases, such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular conditions, ultimately reducing the long-term burden on healthcare systems.**

## 4. Leveraging AI and Blockchain for Smarter Procurement

The future of sustainable public food procurement lies in digital innovation. Emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and blockchain can revolutionize the way tenders are designed and managed. AI-powered data analytics can provide real-time insights into market trends, supplier performance, and nutritional impacts, enabling procurement officers to make data-driven decisions. Blockchain technology, on the other hand, can enhance transparency and traceability in the food supply chain, ensuring that sustainability claims are verifiable and reducing the risk of fraud. By integrating these technologies, public procurement can become more efficient, precise, and aligned with sustainability goals.

## 5. Overcoming Challenges and Embracing Best Practices

While the benefits of sustainable procurement are clear, implementation remains a challenge. Many EU Member States lack the monitoring frameworks needed to ensure compliance with sustainability standards. Public authorities also face administrative hurdles in sourcing sustainable food, often due to limited knowledge and resources. However, countries like Sweden, Finland, and Estonia offer promising examples of success, where digital tools and training programs help procurement officers make informed and sustainable purchasing decisions.

## 6. A Vision for the Future: Recommendations for Policymakers

To make sustainable public food procurement the norm, the EU and its Member States must take decisive action:

**From Voluntary to Mandatory:** Sustainability criteria should be more than recommendations — they should be legally binding across all Member States.

**Stronger Monitoring and Compliance Mechanisms:** Procurement contracts should include clear sustainability benchmarks, with regular reporting requirements.

**Investing in Training and Support:** Procurement officers need the right tools and knowledge to implement sustainability criteria effectively.

**Utilizing AI and Blockchain:** Governments should invest in AI-driven analytics and blockchain traceability systems to ensure more precise and transparent procurement.

**A Collaborative Approach:** Policymakers must work closely with suppliers, farmers, and consumers to create a procurement system that benefits all stakeholders..



## 7. Roadmap for the Future

Sustainable public food procurement is not just a policy ambition; it is a necessity for a healthier, more resilient Europe. By making bold choices today, EU institutions can drive long-term change, ensuring that every public meal served aligns with the values of sustainability, health, and fairness. **By emphasizing prevention in public health through nutritious food procurement, the EU can significantly lower healthcare costs and improve overall well-being.** Incorporating AI and blockchain will make procurement smarter and more transparent, while addressing the needs of the ageing population will enhance public health outcomes. The path forward requires commitment, collaboration, and the political will to turn policy into action, but the benefits — a more sustainable food system, healthier communities, and a stronger local economy — make this investment worthwhile.

### Roadmap for Implementation

#### Short-term (by 2025)

- Strengthen training for procurement officers and food service professionals.
- Improve food transparency through digital monitoring and AI-based analytics.
- Enhance educational programs on sustainable and healthy diets within schools.

#### Medium-term (by 2030)

- Fully integrate sustainable food procurement into national policy frameworks.
- Establish decentralized and regionally integrated supply chains to strengthen local economies.
- Secure greater financial support for sustainable school food programs.

#### Long-term (by 2050)

- Achieve harmonized EU-wide policies that ensure universal access to sustainable, high-quality food in public institutions.
- Fully transition towards plant-forward diets with minimal environmental impact.
- Make AI and blockchain the standard tools for tendering, monitoring, and enforcement of procurement policies.

## 8. Conclusions

Public procurement is no longer an isolated **administrative function**; it is a powerful **geopolitical tool**. The ability of governments to **shape food systems through procurement policies** should help to determine their capacity to respond to **future crises, ensure food sovereignty, and maintain economic resilience**. As the EU refines its **Green Deal and Farm to Fork Strategy**, it must ensure that procurement serves not only **sustainability and public health objectives** but also the **long-term geopolitical stability of its food system**.

The transition towards **sustainable public food procurement must therefore be integrated into the EU's broader geopolitical strategy**, ensuring that food policies are resilient against market shocks, trade disruptions, and financial manipulation. **Only by balancing environmental, social, and geopolitical considerations can public procurement truly serve as a pillar of a just and sustainable food system**.

This policy paper has been developed within the framework of **GreenPaths**, a project funded by the EU's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement 101112305, reflecting the expertise and vision of **Risteco**, which has long advocated for the transformation of public food procurement as a key driver of sustainability, social justice, and economic resilience. The insights presented here are also deeply informed by discussions held during the **Eating City Summer Campus 2024**, where diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, researchers, and practitioners, engaged in a collaborative dialogue on reshaping food systems. Furthermore, this work builds upon key reflections and strategic priorities identified in the **National Policy Dialogue**, conducted within the framework of the **School Food 4 Change project**, which underscores the urgency of aligning public food procurement with health, environmental, and equity goals. By bringing together these perspectives, this policy paper aims to contribute to a bold and actionable vision for a **more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive food future in Europe**.

*“Now is the time to reclaim procurement as a public good - one that serves citizens, not financial markets”*

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