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# Bringing Sustainability to the Collective Table through Public Food Procurement

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WP3 Sectorally applied Sustainable Public Procurement



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# Bringing Sustainability to the Collective Table through Public Food Procurement

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*This document is primarily addressed at policymakers at both the EU and national levels who aim to leverage public food procurement to enhance sustainability and drive systemic change in food systems.*

## Policy Highlights

1. Move beyond voluntary Green Public Procurement (GPP): adopt comprehensive mandatory sustainability criteria for public food procurement as the minimum standard across Europe.
2. Move beyond the tendering phase: strengthen the planning and execution phases and empower practitioners with skills and tools.
3. Foster vertical and horizontal cooperation to build inclusive and decentralized food governance.

## Introduction

Governments at all levels procure food and catering services for public institutions such as schools, universities and hospitals. Public Food Procurement (PFP) involves entire food supply chains, significantly impacting food availability and accessibility. This positions public purchasers as key agents in building *a fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system*.

## Problem Statement

Despite specific EU GPP voluntary criteria for food, catering services and vending machines, and opportunities under Directive 2014/24/EU for pursuing sustainability in public procurement, several challenges hinder the widespread uptake of Sustainable Public Food Procurement (SPFP) across the EU. Legal uncertainties about defining food sustainability, designing sustainable food tenders, and supporting local food systems while ensuring equal-treatment and non-discrimination are significant barriers. Additionally, practical obstacles such as lack of knowledge and appropriate tools, complex procedures and budgetary constraints make it hard for practitioners to move beyond the *'lowest price as usual'* and embrace sustainable practices. A huge amount of public funds is therefore spent on cheap food and catering, neglecting aspects of nutritional

quality, environmental sustainability and social equity.

## Key Recommendations

### 1. Adopting comprehensive mandatory minimum sustainability requirements at the EU level

Public food procurement procedures must shift their attention from the cost to the value of food. To this end, Directive 2014/24/EU could be revised to limit the use of the lowest price criterion and make it mandatory, for this sector, the application of the MEAT based on the best price-quality ratio.

The shortcomings of voluntary approaches to sustainable public procurement were acknowledged by the EU Farm to Fork strategy, which called for the introduction of mandatory criteria and targets. Shifting to minimum mandatory criteria for SPFP can, in fact, drive substantial change by providing certainty, predictability and reliability for businesses and promoting healthy and sustainable diets in institutional catering.

From a formal viewpoint, it is recommended that the EU minimum criteria take the form of (a) minimum substantial and procedural mandatory requirements, rather than (b) targets, since the former are more precise, systematic and enforceable. Italy and France

are illustrative cases of the two different approaches.

From a substantial viewpoint, the criteria must go beyond environmental issues and encompass social, health, ethical and educational considerations. They should support the access of smaller producers to procurement markets, for instance by promoting short supply chains, procedural simplification or introducing set-aside mechanisms. Additionally, on the example of Regulation 1115/2023 on Deforestation, new exclusion criteria can be introduced to sanction economic operators' non-compliance with due diligence obligations, thus contributing to enforce human, labor and other social rights through public procurement.

## **2. Strengthen the planning and execution phases and empower practitioners with skills and tools**

The inclusion of sustainable criteria and clauses into public food tenders fails short in achieving intended outcomes without careful planning and vigilant contract monitoring. Before launching tenders, public buyers must precisely define their needs and engage in sourcing and market dialogue. This ensures

alignment between public demands and market capacities, giving economic operators the time and support they need. During contract execution, practical tools for contract monitoring and data collection must be made available to public purchasers, also to enable evaluations of the impacts achieved. Training and technical support must be provided at regional, national and local levels to food market actors, kitchen and canteen staff and public procurers.

## **3. Foster vertical and horizontal cooperation to build inclusive and decentralized food governance**

Coherent food policies must be developed at all levels of government, adopting a systemic understanding of public food procurement as a comprehensive and multi-dimensional policy. Cooperation across sectors, administrative divisions and stakeholder groups is essential. Communities of practice should be established for peer-to-peer exchanges among public food sector actors. Participatory mechanisms must be implemented to design, monitor and assess food procurement contracts, ensuring accountability for sustainability compliance.

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