

Competing school food agendas and green public food procurement

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Abstract

Public procurement constitutes a significant share of public expenditure and as such it is a politically significant instrument that can be used to promote ideas that governing actors find important. Latvia introduced mandatory Green Public Procurement(GPP) in 2014. This was generally seen as a response to foreign policy developments – a means to strengthen local farmers and food industry. However, early on the practices that municipalities used while implementing GPP demonstrated that there are differences in ways how regulations were seen; in ways how municipalities were solving practicalities related to the procurement process; and in communication with actors involved related to school food. Recognizing these differences the paper asks two questions: first, what are the policy making and policy implementation points where the original ideas can be reshaped; second, what consequences these modifications may cause in quality of greenness, for the range of agents who may participate, in the selection process and in other aspects related to GPP. The paper concludes that the openness of GPP offers possibilities for people to push through practices they might benefit from. However, municipalities' and schools' willingness to participate in GPP planning, execution and monitoring can promote pupils access to high quality meals.

1. Introduction

Public procurement (PP) accounts for a high share of overall public expenditure (Schapper et al. 2006). As such it is a politically significant instrument that can be used to promote ideas that governing actors find important (Izumi et al. 2010). PP can be an instrument of change. It might be difficult to change things for every separate administrative unit. However, governing actors as a group hold significant buying power that according to some authors have an enormous potential to influence practices in the general public as well as to force the private sector to introduce new ways of doing business (Morgan and Sonnino, 2008). PP can help creating demand (Testa et al. 2012) and has the power to set trends (Sonnino and McWilliam 2011).

Green public food procurement (GPP) (if not indicated otherwise in this text Green Public Procurement refers only to green food procurement) is not an exception – it is expected to change general practices dominating in food supply chains (Sonnino et al. 2014; Buying green... 2016). This belief has fueled the interest of researchers studying food chains to address procurement and has placed procurement among the instruments frequently suggested for facilitating sustainability of food systems (see Barling et al. 2013).

Latvia introduced mandatory GPP in 2014. The official regulations defined six environmental aspects that characterize GPP for catering and five environmental aspects that characterize GPP for food products. Based on these aspects green criteria are identified (which in overall closely resembles EU GPP criteria (see Catering & Food... 2008). Procurement qualifies as *green* if it takes in consideration at least two criteria. However regulations do not specify how these criteria have to be interpreted and how procurement should be organized in practice. The green procurement procedure is obligatory for all public institutions offering meals to its clients. However, the biggest and the most interesting group of institutions affected by these regulations are schools. In Latvia, in the case of school catering there is much stronger presence of moral arguments and more pronounced and publicly visible presence of other regulations that distinguish it from other public institutions offering meals.

Schools in Latvia are founded by municipalities and consequently municipalities are also the actor which is expected to solve practical questions related to school functioning. The model how the practicalities are solved might differ from municipality to municipality – while some are solving everything centrally, other municipalities offer greater freedom to schools. Furthermore, for some functions municipalities receive state funding, while for others they have to pay themselves. This causes additional differences between municipalities.

Early on the practices that municipalities used while implementing GPP demonstrated that there are differences in ways how regulations were seen; in ways how municipalities were solving practicalities related to the procurement process; and in communication with actors involved related to school food. This paper analyses differences mentioned above. It analyses implementation of green school food procurement to show adaptations made, interpretations introduced and application models created and most importantly – where and how stakeholders manage to intervene in the procurement process to pursue their vision of what is beneficial and desirable. In order to do this GPP related practices are examined both on national and municipal level. Because of this the article analyses national level school food procurement regulations as well as analysing three municipal cases where GPP has been implemented.

Two research questions are analysed in the article. First, what are the policy making and policy implementation points where the original ideas can be reshaped (this question also includes a sub-question – why stakeholders are redefining GPP). Second, what consequences these modifications might cause in quality of greenness, for the range of agents who may participate, in the selection process and in other aspects related to GPP. Since the paper is looking both at national level policy making and at municipal level implementation it might be that consequences identified could cause both long term changes in policies as well as minor changes in separate schools which then would be felt only by limited number of pupils. Both questions supplement each other and allow offering a more detailed explanation of positive and negative effects emerging from inconsistencies characterising changes occurring after modifications at any point of policy-practice relations. However, in-depth analysis of both questions would require much longer report than this paper. Because of this we offer only a exploratory analysis of second question.

The paper is based on data gathered in the Transmango project. Transmango focuses on vulnerability and resilience of EU food systems. This paper presents initial results from the study. The paper is based on media analysis, 16 in-depth interviews and several sources of secondary data.

2. Green public procurement of food and catering

During the last decades PP has been identified as one of the central instruments that governing actors have available in order to promote their goals and to change the behaviour of market actors (Sonnino et al. 2014; Buying Green, 2016). As an instrument for change, procurement has attracted the interest of all concerned groups – government actors, NGOs, market actors and scientists. Published research illustrates how procurement can be used to support the interests of local entrepreneurs which would then presumably help improving overall social and economic conditions of the community (Preuss 2009). There are also examples illustrating how procurement can serve to promote certain ethical principles or social goals (Preuss 2009). Public procurement is also seen by many experts as an opportunity for certain actors – as for example, local farmers (Izumi et al. 2010). However, judging from scientific articles discussing the matter it is safe to suggest that it is improved environmental performance or GPP that has attracted most of researchers' interest (Smith et al. 2016).

In theoretical literature several concepts are used to designate procurement oriented towards certain goals – such as '*Sustainable Public Procurement*', '*GPP*', '*Environmentally Responsible Public Procurement*', '*Green Purchasing and Eco-Procurement*' (Michelsen and de Boer 2009). , In most cases these concepts incorporate rather similar ideas – procurement that relies on criteria that reduces negative consequences in all product life cycle stages. There are some differences in researchers recognising which analytical fields are important and emphasised in procurement – for some these are only environmental issues, while for other there are also ethical, economic and social issues. However, despite these differences some researchers continue to use these concepts interchangeably. Furthermore, no matter what concepts are used the general reason behind the interest in procurement remains the same – the power of public purchasing is seen as an instrument to promote the emergence of more responsible practices in food systems. Additionally, each of these fields hold multiple interpretations regarding the criteria recognised as important – while some of the researchers concentrate their attention on political preconditions needed for implementing GPP, others study environmental aspects chosen for selecting the best tender, food waste associated with school meal procurement, etc. Meanwhile, studies also reveal that while there is evidence supporting many of the expectations, there are also research suggesting that the expectations might be exaggerated (Izumi et al. 2010).

Implementation of GPP is usually achieved by defining a set of either general criteria or by referring to certain quality standards (Cerutti et al. 2016). This is also the way GPP has been organized in Latvia. The general openness (or flexibility) of GPP to various needs has led to a situation illustrated by Smith et al. – each country and each municipality can choose different principles for selecting *green* products for school meals and thus promote their individual version of goals (Smith et al. 2016; Thomson and Jackson 2007). Furthermore, there is also evidence illustrating how various stakeholders search for ways to extend the accepted interpretation in order to shape procurement in a way that promotes their vision– some examples might include NGOs assisting local governments to introduce procurement oriented towards regional food (Thomson and Jackson 2007). Thus all this evidence suggests that final GPP will take various forms.

The identified diversity hampers the possibility to come up with simple conclusions regarding the best and worst practices. However some researchers have identified major obstacles that hinder GPP implementation. Among these aspects researchers mention lack of information, lack of guidance documents and training; difficulties of fulfilling complicated procedures with the limited

resources possessed by procurement organizers (usually municipalities); economic considerations and lack of knowledge about environmental impacts of these products (Testa et al. 2012; Bouwer et al. 2006). Furthermore, many of these obstacles (especially organizational) become more visible in the case of smaller municipalities. These municipalities will have difficulties to mobilize all the needed resources that are needed to organize the procurement process (Michelsen and de Boer 2009). Meanwhile, studies also show that all municipalities have limited resources and have to make decisions as to which goals to pursue (Thomson and Jackson 2007). Similarly, in Latvia, official documents have concluded that successful GPP implementation requires overcoming set of information, economic, organisational and technical challenges. Major identified threats that might hamper GPP are lack of trained personnel, insufficient exchange of best practice and networking among stakeholders, and the short budget cycle that might cause difficulties with assessment and illustrating the beneficial impact of GPP (Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development of the Republic of Latvia (VARAM) 2015).

On the other hand, published studies also suggest processes that are the basis of successful GPP. These include such aspects as enthusiasm of opinion leaders, collaboration between environmental groups and institutions organising procurement, functioning GPP strategy and a certain level of centralization, which can all promote successful GPP (Michelsen and de Boer 2009).

These considerations allow the conclusion that many GPP-related complications emerge from the complex nature of GPP. The process related interplay of several factors, most of them local-level characteristics, renders it unrealistic to offer a ready to use blueprint for how to implement such policy. A successful model would require knowledge, resources and mutual agreements between key stakeholders. One can overcome these problems by collaboration, motivated involved actors and commonality of vision. Both possible limitations and aspects promoting the implementation of GPP presuppose that there are moments for interventions that allow redefining the direction of GPP. These points of interventions are clearly needed because each of these municipalities has their different context and different needs, which means that each of them will have to put forward somewhat different goals (Thomson and Jackson 2007). However, openness to various solutions can be both the way to success as well as the cause for failure.

3. Neo-institutional perspective

So far this paper has argued that school food GPP has to align the interests and interpretations of all involved stakeholders and has to take into account the local situation. One of the conceptual models that permits explanation of implementation of specific policies in multi-stakeholder situations is neo-institutionalism. This has been an influential body of theory and research since the 1970s, addressing diffusion of practices and ideas, implementation of policies, and their transformation, in various fields – homogeneous and – increasingly - heterogeneous.

This theoretical perspective sees institutions (in this case, involved in defining and implementing the school meals policies) operating in an environment where there is a multitude of other institutions. Neo-institutionalism allows a dynamic view of institutions as generators of practices, identities and interests situated in broader socio-cultural contexts. These contexts, in their turn, shape organizational behavior through cognitive, normative and regulative pressures. Transformation of top-down pressures is especially interesting in the case of adoption and localisation of new policy regulations, which are noted to be often ambiguous and open to ground-level reinterpretation (Lounsbury 2001).

Overall, the acknowledgement of the complexity of institutional environments and how this shapes the diffusion of new practices, is wide-spread in academic research. Lately, there has been even more pronounced interest in organizational heterogeneity and ways how processes associated with this diversity can become a source of change. (Lounsbury 2008). In the case of GPP some ideas emerging from these studies are of particular importance. One of these notions is the influences of the so-called “street level bureaucrats” as the final chain-link in policy implementation, as they actively make policy (see Ellis 2011; Durose 2011; Rice 2012). Street-level bureaucrats’ role stems from the premise that “the state” and its “policies” need to be constantly (re-)enacted and (re-)negotiated; and while the officially acknowledged building blocks are encapsulated in official political instruments, the way political decisions will *look* will depend upon the actors implementing these policies (Rice 2012). In other words, the practitioners closest to actual implementation of a policy, exercising certain autonomy, have an important bearing on what the policy looks like in practice. However, the level of autonomy will be influenced by several characteristics of the relationship between actors involved in governance. Thus the policy diffusion practices described in this paper are likely to evolve during the implementation process, requiring custom adaptation, domestication, and reconfiguration to make them meaningful and suitable within specific organizational contexts (Robertson, Swan, & Newell, 1996; Strang & Kim, 2004).

4. GPP in Latvia

Public procurement in Latvia is only marginally smaller (17% of GDP) than the EU average (19%). (VARAM 2015). Thus similarly to elsewhere PP in Latvia is an important tool to further broad-scaled changes in public practices. The general application of GPP in Latvia may be traced back to 2004. The first tentative experiments in using the procedure for state-funded school meal procurement started in 2010 and have been increasingly in use in recent years (2014 – 2015). The first experiences in applying GPP to school meals were promoted by a couple of pioneering initiatives around 2010, namely the 7th framework research project Foodlinks (Galli and Brunori 2013), teaming up with the medium-sized city of Tukums, and the initiative by the Waldorf school in Riga. Both of these cases received outside support in implementing GPP – in case of Tukums municipality local governing actors had the possibility to consult with participants in the Foodlinks project while the Waldorf school received help from local NGOs. Both cases abandoned GPP soon after they lost assistance and pressure from outside stakeholders. From these initial attempts to introduce GPP there have been some other examples during the next few years. Most of these cases (such as Bauska municipality, Koknese municipality, Rujiena municipality) have aimed to use GPP to support the local economy by creating a market for the product of local producers. However, all of these cases faced problems and eventually abandoned the practice.

Despite these experiences GPP received a considerable political boost in the aftermath of the Russian trade embargo, when to protect local producers, in October 2014 the Cabinet of Ministers following the initiative of the Ministry of Agriculture, adopted regulation Nr.673 “On application of environmental criteria and proposal selection criteria in procuring food and catering services”. This was generally seen as a response to the foreign policy development, to strengthen local farmers and food industry (although of course this was not stated directly). Partly the vision to use GPP as an economic instrument is reflected by a shift in actors promoting GPP. Before the embargo it was the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development that lobbied for GPP. Yet the regulations that officially introduced GPP as a mandatory solution were pushed through by the Ministry of Agriculture. Thus school meal procurement became particularly visible in the context of difficulties in local food industry and agriculture.

Final version of regulation Nr.673 identified 8 criteria that can be taken into account when GPP is organized: share of organic products; share of products registered in national quality scheme; share of products coming from integrated production sources; share of products that are packed in reusable packaging ; share of products that are not pre-packed in separate portions; share of products delivered in environmentally friendly packaging; reduced emissions of delivery services; production-to-table time. Some of these categories represent the local economic interests of involved actors.

The issue of the capacity of local municipalities to apply the GPP regulation became a visible concern, with an important part of AKIS, the Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre (LRATC) attempting to provide support. LRATC claims that they are seriously investing in supporting and educating municipal procurement organizers. In order to persuade municipalities to introduce GPP, LRATC also commissioned a study that illustrates the higher efficiency of money spent on local products (Korpa et al. 2015). Meanwhile, national level institutions issued instructions for GPP implementation and GPP development plans. The National Bureau for Public Procurement has been organizing public lectures about the procurement process. Despite all these efforts national level institutions complain that they cannot control the process, municipalities conclude that they lack all kind of resources, some schools suggest that the quality of meals pupils receive has not improved while practically used solutions differ significantly. Our further analysis will reveal major points of interaction that allow these aspects to emerge.

5. Methodology

In this study a case study approach is used. The procurement strategies of three municipalities in Latvia are analysed and compared. As it is common for case studies multiple data sources are used. This allows developing of broader explanations of the observed processes.

The following data is used in this paper. Initially a structured media analysis has been conducted. It covered marginally less than 150 articles available in public space obtained from 55 different media sources. This initial step was mainly to illustrate the diversity of explanations and interpretations present in public space. Furthermore, during the next steps additional media analysis was conducted. However, this further use of media was less structured and oriented towards a search for responses for specific questions arising as the policy developments were happening.

The core data used comes from in-depth interviews with people involved in school catering organizations. Overall 16 in-depth interviews have been conducted. Among the interviewed persons two represented parent organizations, one represented a ministry, four interviews were with municipal representatives, four were with school employees, two were with people assisting municipalities or schools organizing procurement, one interview was conducted with an expert studying school meals and one interview was with a caterers association. People interviewed were invited for a full day workshop to discuss the future of school meals in Latvia.

Furthermore some secondary data sources were used – mainly data collected by official institutions: quantitative data collected by Food and Veterinary Service on food safety breaches, data collected by Procurement Surveillance Bureau on procurement processes, official statistical data.

For in-depth analysis three municipalities were selected: Riga, Tukums and Gulbene. All three municipalities differ significantly. Riga is the capital of Latvia. As the capital of Latvia with around 700 000) inhabitants it has highly centralized and sophisticated procedures of organising

procurement (PMLM 2014). This municipality represents the sole territory in Latvia which is so densely populated. Tukums is a rural municipality located in close proximity to Riga and officially is located in the Riga region. With its population of 32 000 (PMLM 2014) it is one of the biggest municipalities in Latvia. However, its population density – 24 people per km² (CSB 2015) puts it among the least populated municipalities in Riga region. Yet the population density is higher than in most other rural municipalities. Tukums was the first municipality to introduce GPP. Gulbenes municipality is a rural municipality located almost 200km east of Riga. It is among the biggest municipalities in area. There are little bit less than 24 000 (PMLM 2014) inhabitants in the municipality and the overall population density is 12 people per km² (CSB 2015) which is little bit less than average density in the region. However, the municipality has been involved in a search for new models to organize its inner activities and has become an unexpected hub for various kind of activism.

6. Results and Conclusions

In his chapter points where stakeholders might carry out interventions in GPP practices and consequences of these adaptations will be portrayed. These interventions do not have to occur all the time but might have been present just for a short moment yet have left a significant change. To secure the structure for this analysis the points will be identified from the highest governance level to the lowest level – from interventions that influence most of the actors involved to interventions that influence only some of the actors.

6.1 Selection Criteria

On the national level the most visible example of how powerful food producer groups succeeding in influencing GPP is the criteria that were included in the final GPP regulation Nr673. Among all the criteria regulations identified as *green*, the national food product quality scheme is mentioned. Although theoretically it does not exclude any foreign products which can demonstrate adherence to their own quality scheme, in practice this category is advantageous to products participating in the Green Spoon quality scheme. Green Spoon is a quality scheme developed by the food producer association and it has been a subject of criticisms among actors supporting more responsible food production for a while now. Yet it has received a lot of support from the Ministry of Agriculture. As a criteria mentioned in GPP it is meant to secure the position of local producers in the procurement. However, it seems to be protecting only a group of mainly large local food producers. Furthermore, the initial definition of the quality scheme held a much stronger stance towards protecting local producers of raw materials (by defining that one aspect of a quality product is that a high share of raw materials originate from the same country). Currently a spin-off quality Maroon spoon scheme has been introduced – it receives the same support from the Ministry and enjoys same benefits of being a criterion of GPP. However, it does not require local ingredients in product production and claims that processing is conducted in Latvia. This basically means that the quality scheme becomes ever more beneficial to big food producers.

The scheme has been lobbied as a key component of GPP procurement and is often used interchangeably with organic schemes in public procurement. Since the Green Spoon products are a lot cheaper to produce (it does not require use of organic products in order for producers to receive Green Spoon or Maroon Spoon certificate), these products have a strong advantage in procurement.

6.2 Flexibility and Localisation

Current GPP regulations for school meals in principle allow a certain flexibility and localisation of approach, as the environmental criteria may be included in a number of ways: in the subject of the procurement, in the technical specifications (e.g. mentioning the desirable modes of

production); the selection criteria for types of tender participants (including request for specific qualifications and experience); using quality criteria in addition to price; in special contract provisions to state the preferences for personnel qualifications, modes of service delivery, etc.

6.3 Organisation of procurement

Currently there are at least two kinds of procurement for school meals: for catering service providers (on-site or involving transportation from a centralised kitchen), and procurement for food which is then prepared by the school kitchen staff. The end result of procurements may be varied and the winners of the tender may be either major catering companies, or small ones, or an individual school may maintain relationships with a number of local producers and wholesalers to get the products it needs.

Thus adapting the standard GPP for school meal procurement may entail various locally meaningful adjustments, and in principle opens opportunities for positively influencing the kind of food that pupils are to consume, by considering health, environmental, local development and other concerns. However, although policy automatically presupposes one separate moment where stakeholders could intervene to pursue locally meaningful goals in practice it seems that this possibility is not as popular as it might be. A scan of procurement documentation pertaining to school meals in various territorial-administrative units of Latvia shows that there are few municipalities that have chosen their own specific way of selecting criteria for procurement. Meanwhile, for most municipalities regulation is in place, yet adapted solutions seem to be reflecting geographical clusters of influence. Thus there is not much adaptation to local situations, opportunities and constraints. These policies rather reflect political influences and ties between municipalities.

6.4 Municipality staff capacity and funding

Municipal financial and intellectual capacity differs, which causes differences in food procurement. Firstly, successful GPP requires market knowledge. However, in many cases municipalities struggle to grasp the realities of the market. All three municipalities analysed here have tried to communicate with various producers. Yet in many cases they realized that they do not know where to look for potential suppliers, how to communicate with them and how to motivate them. As a consequence these municipalities find it significantly easier to hire just one enterprise that can secure all the catering. In search for the simpler solutions municipalities are ready to make compromises and sacrifice *green* principles. Yet there are exceptions when municipalities hand the rights to organize procurement to a school. In these cases the situation is even more complicated – adaptations made by schools in some cases lead to corruption while in other to close relations between local farmers and schools.

6.5 Catering control

Currently there is no unified system of overseeing and monitoring the GPP system, and analysing actual local practices. This fosters uncertainty both in those applying the system and the institutions which in principle have to oversee it (e.g. the Food and Veterinary authority). GPP incorporates two notions that have been separated before – procurement principles and food characteristics. Unfortunately there are no institutions that would hold rights or would have competence to control both. Thus there are uncertainties as how to follow processes occurring after the procurement procedure has been finished. The National Public Procurement Bureau is able to control the procurement by monitoring the paperwork but cannot analyse the quality of food. The service allowed to control food quality can assess the quality of food yet does not have the qualifications to compare these products with official procurement documentation. This opens space for a line of different frauds. Yet the main idea of these frauds is always the same – the

caterer holds a possibility to easily serve products differing from those it is officially contracted to use. It is next to impossible to control the kind of products that get purchased, especially if the catering company is a skilled one at paperwork. This shows that there is room for maneuver which can be used either to provide the best and freshest possible food, or barely stick to the lowest minimum or – serve products of lower quality.

6.6 Involvement of school personnel

The analyzed example illustrates that leadership and interest of other actors plays a key role in the outcome of GPP. Where school administration and parent organisations tend not to give priority to the quality of school meals; and schoolgoers most often have no say in decision-making; thus school meal caterers who have won public procurement contracts are fairly autonomous from any feedback and monitoring. They are state-protected, safeguarded by the outcomes of the public procurement tender and the intricacies of procedures. So, school meals, for all that the right procurement procedures are in place, often exist in a no-man's land of little or no scrutiny – except for the obvious cases of food poisoning. This does not mean that schoolgoers cannot get fresh, healthy and tasty meals – they can and they do, in the cases when the bottom-up controls are in place owing to the combination of system factors.

7. Conclusions

Thus, in an exploratory study of localization of school meal GPP we conclude that while on the highest levels of producing regulations it may be the most powerful food system actors who influence the design of the procurement criteria, on the “ground” level the actual design and implementation are influenced by trade-offs between municipal staff capacities to engage with local producers and/or catering companies, differences in available municipal funding, and historical local practices. The example of the Green spoon and Maroon spoon serves as an example how powerful actors can shape policies. Meanwhile, adaptations made on-site illustrate the ground level rule bending. All of the above is also happening within the realities of very limited monitoring and control systems for GPP and the activity and commitment or lack thereof of “street level” actors – parents, school administrators, catering companies, local farmers and their organisations.

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