

The Public as political consumer – caseinsights from developing regional public food strategies in Danish Region Nord

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Abstract

This paper aims at giving insight from the case of Region North in Denmark and the experiences so far regarding barriers and opportunities in relation to local food sourcing for the hospitals in the regions. The paper reflects on the opportunities that new cooperative organisational project based frameworks offer in terms of overcoming constraints and barriers and concludes by giving recommendations for actions at short and long term that can facilitate local and regional food sourcing for public food systems. In addition to the procurement strategy the region and in particular the main hospital in the city of Aalborg has enrolled in a joint project that aims at facilitating the use of local foods in its foodservice. Thus the hospital is the main case study of FoodserveInspire project – a cooperation between Aalborg Hospital and Aalborg University . The partners have been developing the project within the framework of a partnership based on the principles of communities of practice and involving a number of local businesses. The findings from the case show that the idea of local and regional public food sourcing is a fragile one and that it is currently challenged by other competing and more globally oriented sourcing strategies as the plans for a nationally based 'Region Denmark' procurement contract. Maybe this is where the public as political consumer enters the arena of sustainable public food procurement.

1.0 Introduction

The captive catering sector is an inherent part of most welfare systems providing food at a daily basis in settings for citizens in places such as school, kindergartens, hospitals and institutions. Although such service provision has a considerable impact on the health of the individual and on the environments the ambitions of this sector has long been limited to produce meals at the lowest possible cost. Public procurement has traditionally been guided solely by EU procurement directives setting strict rules for how to secure the lowest possible prices in the contract and with little room for taking health, sourcing and environment into consideration. However in recent year the captive catering sector has been experiencing a new interest in alternative procurement strategies placing more emphasis on the value of sourcing food in the adjacent local and regional area. This has contributed to development of what has been referred to as the outlines of a new food geography (Renting & Wiskerke).

Being responsible for a large food procurement budget the public food sector has increasingly become aware of their power as consumers. And the idea that public procurement can take on a more active consumer role than previously and play a more active role in the local food economy is gaining momentum. Across Europe a growing number of municipalities and regions shows interest in incorporating the public food procurement in new sustainable consumption and healthy eating strategies. In Denmark this development has been particularly fuelled by new developments in the captive catering sector in which public food provision has been introduced in kindergarten and schools. At the same time public food has also been the target of government attempts to boost organic food and farming (Mikkelsen & Sylvest, 2012) This paper aims at giving insight from the case of Region North in Denmark and the experiences so far regarding barriers and opportunities in relation to local food sourcing for the hospitals in the regions. The paper reflect on the opportunities that new cooperative organisational project based frameworks offer in terms of overcoming constraints and barriers and concludes by giving recommendations for actions at short and long term that can facilitate local and regional food sourcing for public food systems.

2.0 The case of Region North, Denmark.

As a notable food procurement actor Region North of Denmark has recently adopted a strategy favouring procurement of locally produced food for its different food service outlets in the public hospitals of the region. The strategy is aimed at strengthening the competitive advantage of the local food industry by developing their capacity to respond to contemporary public food procurements demands and at the same time branding Region North as a region known for quality foods.

In addition to the procurement strategy the region and in particular the main hospital in the city of Aalborg has enrolled in a joint project that aims at facilitating the use of local foods in its foodservice. Thus the hospital is acting as the main case study of FoodserveInspire project (www.foodservinspire.aau.dk) – a cooperation between Aalborg Hospital and Aalborg University. The partners at the hospital and the university has been developing the project within the framework of a partnership based on the principles of communities of practice and involving a number of local businesses. They have expressed their interest in developing the deliveries to public food systems and the aim of the partnership is to take the opportunities offered in the proceedings of the partnerships in order to learn about the needs and the demands that the public has now and in the near future. Besides the objective of integrating local supply and educating local suppliers for future public consumer expectations the FoodserveInspire project also aims at optimising the hospital foodservice chain through improved food intake and minimised food waste. In particular the optimisation of food intake will be closely related to the consumer experiences and the advantages that local food offer.

3.0 What is local food?

So far, the project has shown that “localness” can be understood in different ways. The general definition of local food is usually related to an effort to promote sustainable development:

“Local food or the local food movement is a collaborative effort to build more locally based, self-reliant food economies - one in which sustainable food production, processing, distribution, and consumption is integrated to enhance the economic, environmental and social health of a particular place” (Feenstra 2002)

Efforts to promote local food are considered to be part of the broader movement for sustainable development (Sonnino 2010) However, the concept can also be used more flexible, as a label for an entity instance that is located in e.g. Region North of DK and hence contribute to providing local jobs. In this case the origin of raw materials is of minor importance. Another use of 'local' is linked to marketing and seen exclusively by the packaging that signals a local origin without having a lasting ties with local ingredients. Another version of this is 'the local recipe' being used without the raw materials does not originate from the region. At the moment it seems as if the 'local raw materials' are the most difficult to get into the supply chain. The reason why, will be discussed in the following pages.

4.0 A framework for working with regional food strategies

The case of Region North has at an early stage shown that regional public food procurement strategies encounter a number of barriers. As a result there must be an effective organisational framework at hand for dealing with these challenges. Experiences from the case show that the idea of communities of practice that has been developed by Wenger & Lave can be a suitable organizational framework for breaking the ground for new procurement strategies. Although the work of Wenger & Lave has been evolving within educational research, insight from their work is readily transferable to practitioner settings. According to Wenger & Lave COP's are networks of

"people who are together on a common idea and who share a common vision to practice this idea and thereby become more competent."

In other words Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and that they want to learn how to do better. In this instance the vision is to improve hospital nutrition by integrating local supply and helping local food businesses.

Communities of Practice (COP's) have traditionally been used to denote the fact that learning occurs "on site" and are not necessarily linked to formal curricula or school like settings. Instead Wenger argues that learning occurs simply by bringing people together. As such learning is situated in "settings". Communities of Practice (COP's) has great relevance in public food system environments. Public food service has traditionally played a peripheral role in the hospital landscape and been regarded as a trivial and mundane activity of low importance. But with growing awareness on the role on eating in health and well being this "business as usual" strategy has come under pressure. The way food is "gone about" in institutional public settings is changing. By linking the researchers "to know" level with the practitioner "to do" level COP's might offer a promising potential in tying closer links between food service practitioners and research.

5.0 Findings so far

The FoodServInspire project provided new resources into the efforts of integrating local foods into the supply chain. The efforts however are not new. The Northern Region has past experience in this area which has been utilized during the course of the current project. The past experience has primarily taken as a point of departure, that the commodities and raw materials comes from the Northern Region and the company also has manufacturing address in the area. The Food Project + (Hospitals Northern Region, 2010) has carried out activities in within sourcing of locally produced foods at several hospitals in the cities of Aalborg, Hjørring and Thisted. The main conclusions (Langdahl, 2010) have been the following:

- Purchase agreements are the main barrier - smaller suppliers find it difficult to meet requirements in the tender for the volume and day-to-day delivery demands of modern hospital food service
- It has been possible on an ad-hoc basis to integrate local food that has been purchased in pilot projects for sub-areas, in addition to procurement.
- For local food sourcing to succeed it takes courage, strong will and high level of knowledge for all involved.
- It is easier to make the sourcing strategy work in small than in large hospitals.
- Patients have expressed great satisfaction in hospitals using local food in several small trials.

6.0 Legal framework for re-localized food sourcing strategies

The main purpose of the existing legal framework for public procurement that has been implemented under current EU legislation is to ensure the public pay the right price for foods and that this happens via the free competition between suppliers in the market place. The *de facto* situation today is that only larger well consolidated and internationally financed suppliers can meet the requirements for large supplies of food to big hospitals and municipalities in Denmark. A large proportion of the goods supplied are purchased on the global market, because lower production costs often outperform Danish, regional or local food (Ruge, 2011).

Despite the existing legal framework and the concern for securing good value for public money many citizens and politicians would, however, like to see, that there should be a re-localization of food consumption in public kitchens - unlike the current consumption of globally produced and processed foods. The findings so far indicate that in order to promote local food economy, it is necessary to increase supply as well as demand. Increase of local supply does not come about by itself. It is necessary to work on different levels. For instance it is important to support the smaller manufacturers and growers and urge them to engage in cooperative forms of knowledge brokering that eventually can lead to increase in supply volumes. In situ education, knowledge brokering and building of capacities and skills are essential for all involved actors. The project so far shows that communities of practice seems to be a well suited framework for bringing about such change.

To promote the demand there must be made public focus on local food and all barriers must be overcome to

facilitate access to devote to hospitals, schools and other institutions. Last but not least, it is important that local politicians raise their voice in favor of local food and explore the possibilities for government regulation that could affect the price ratio between foreign and locally produced foods (Morgan and Morley). By working on both fronts it can lead to more local production, processing, distribution, consumption and re-circulation of nutrients and other materials. This change will also be more eco-friendly, with food miles reduced significantly - while the local economy in the region strengthened.

In general, it is the EU that determines the rules which made provision for the public. To comply with the idea of 'internal market', it is not allowed to use the word LOCAL in a public call for food supply tender. However, it is possible to make provisions in accordance with sustainable principles. That for instance can be procurements of foods that comply with specific requirements on: seasonality, organic food and animal welfare. This will often only be achieved through a political decision, ensuring that contracts must be organized so that they promote sustainable food procurement followed to completion of all employees and stakeholders

7.0 Discussion

The case of region North has shown that there is a growing support to the idea that the public through its procurement strategies and policies can contribute actively and positively to a development of the local and regional food economy and at the same time improve the value of foodservice and strengthen nutritional support. However the case also shows that there is a number of constraints and hindrances for regional and local food to enter freely into the hospital food supply chain.

The findings so far show that patients welcome and appreciate the local food. The biggest barrier is allegedly the constraints of the purchasing agreements. Findings also clearly show that time, processes and room for dialogue between staff and patients are essential. Also suppliers and consumers need to engage in concrete dialogue in which the match between existing food and commodity portfolio and the needs of the CPU needs to be examined in detail. Also a discussion on a more specific definition of localness will help make the strategy work.

The case shows that the FoodServInSPIRe research project has helped facilitating an active partnership with local producers and the partnership draws on the principles of communities of practice (COP's). The case has clearly benefitted from being enrolled in the research project and both researchers and practitioners engaged in the COP report to have been benefitting from the cooperation.

The case has shown that the existing legal framework for public procurement is a real and concrete barrier for local and regional supply to develop further. However the insights from the case shows that this can partly be remedied by dividing contracts into smaller entities without competitive tendering. (www.ski.dk; www.danskeregioner.dk).

The findings from the case also show that the idea of local and regional public food sourcing is a fragile one and that it is challenged by other competing and more globally oriented sourcing strategies such as the plans for a nationally based 'Region Denmark' procurement contract.

The project so far has shown that learning and knowing about future public demands in the food procurement area can be of considerable value in particular for small and medium sized businesses and that this perspective may act as a driver for businesses to participate in a sustainable, local public food partnership. The findings also point to the fact that there is a need to act in partnership at different levels. Practitioners at hospital food service level can benefit from coordinated action with other relevant change agents at ward level, researchers etc. But also outside the COP/partnership environment action needs to be taken. In Denmark

similar political initiatives seems to be emerging in the wake of new calls from organic and local procurement policies. Such networks would clearly have a potential to influence the existing legal framework in much more effective way if they concert their action and actually act as a 'political consumer' in order to promote local and sustainable development. Within the Nordic Countries several examples are present (www.foedevareplatform.dk) and the same is true at European level (www.purefoodlinks.eu). As such, good opportunities exist for more awareness raising on the topic. At the research level an important challenge will be, to further specify the definitions related to "localness" and 'sustainability' and to study how these new change agendas interact with other important agendas in the institutional food service sector like for instance the government driven agenda on '60% organic food in public kitchens in Denmark'.

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