

Public food procurement as a game changer for food system transformation



The last decade has seen various countries, regions, and cities from low-income to high-income economies develop public food procurement (PFP) initiatives designed to use government purchasing power and regular demand for food as a policy instrument to promote sustainable development.¹ These initiatives—often also referred to as institutional food procurement, including school meals programmes and purchase of food for public hospitals, prisons, universities, public building cafeterias, and other social programmes—have been increasingly recognised as an important entry point to trigger more sustainable food systems and healthy diets.^{2–9} They are also an important instrument for the achievement of target 12.7 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): “to promote public procurement practices that are sustainable in accordance with national policies and priorities”.

A key feature of PFP is its potential, based on its policy and regulatory frameworks, to establish what food will be purchased (such as local, diverse, nutritious, healthy, and culturally appropriate), from whom it will be purchased (eg, from local smallholder farmers, small and medium-sized food enterprises, women, youth, and other vulnerable producer groups), and from what type of production systems it will be purchased (eg, from agricultural production that ensures environmental sustainability and conserves biodiversity).¹ Considering the extent of public sector demand and how these choices are made, PFP holds considerable potential to shape norms around food, to influence both food consumption and food production patterns and to deliver multiple social, economic, and environmental benefits, including climate resilience, for a multiplicity of beneficiaries. Furthermore, depending on how these choices are made, local, regional, and national governments can tailor PFP to various policy objectives, according to their own priorities and contexts, pursuing different outcomes linked to the three dimensions of sustainability. This flexibility makes PFP a unique cross-sectoral instrument, suitable for very different contexts, including from low-income to high-income economies.

The transformative potential of PFP has been identified in the dialogues leading up to the UN Food

Systems Summit as an important entry point to shape food systems, having a key role in improving the availability and affordability of the diverse and often perishable nutritious food found in small-scale production systems. What happens before and after the summit presents a unique opportunity to reshape government policies and investments in agriculture, infrastructure, and transport that can help grow and shape the market for healthy foods, and for PFP to deliver more nutrient-rich foods sourced locally.

For PFP to be truly transformative in the aftermath of the food summit, it is crucial that all complementary game changers and actions—such as improved enabling policy and regulatory frameworks, school food programmes, reduction of the costs and risks faced by the SMEs and smallholder producers of nutritious foods, appropriate supply chain infrastructure, and nature-positive solutions that seek to increase agroecology and agrobiodiversity for diverse production and resilience—are aligned, joined-up, and fully integrated to promote a comprehensive and coherent approach to sustainable public food procurement. That is, a comprehensive approach that recognises PFP as a key instrument to promote the SDGs and its target 12.7 and its linkages with the existing international frameworks and the broader debate on sustainable public procurement. This is crucial not only to ensure availability and affordability of nutrient-rich foods for sustainable healthy diets, but also to foster the recognition of PFP as a multifaceted policy instrument able to achieve multiple social, economic, and environmental outcomes and benefit multiple beneficiaries in very different contexts, including food consumers, food producers, and the local community. Currently, these complementary game changing solutions and actions related to PFP are dispersed and do not allow for the required comprehensive approach to the topic.

The considerable potential of PFP to shape food systems comes also with great complexity for its successful implementation. Despite the increasing recognition and potential of PFP, it remains an underexplored topic. The linkages between PFP and the broader sustainable development agenda; the

multifaceted nature of PFP and multiple potential benefits and beneficiaries; the many PFP instruments, enablers and barriers as well as the experiences and scaling-up strategies from various cities, regions and countries, still require further analysis. Analysis that calls for a multidisciplinary approach, with contributions not only from different areas of knowledge but also from different actors with different roles and perspectives on the topic.¹⁰

We declare no competing interests.

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