

## **Can regional public food procurement policies contribute to more sustainable cities? - case insights from the Aalborg city foodscape study**

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### **Abstract**

There is an increasing interest in understanding the role of foodways in creating urban and regional identities and shaping their food cultures. In particular the role of the public has drawn attention. Food on the public plate is an important part of public welfare systems in the Nordic countries. As a result, the public through its procurement power has the potential to be able to shape local and regional food economies in a more sustainable way. Furthermore, changing the practices of the public food services in a more sustainable way seem to send an important signal to citizens about its ambitions on the future directions and sustainability of the local food system. However, city based food sourcing initiatives introduces a shift in the way in which food are sourced for the public plate since food procurement has traditionally been driven by lowest price in order to comply with the EU procurement directive. The idea of cities and regions driving food procurement policies and thereby shaping the food economies in the region therefore requires practical implementation and change of mindsets and procedures. This paper examines the case of the city of Aalborg foodscape project and aims at discussing how the public through regional public food procurement policies can contribute to the creation of more sustainable cities. It disucses the role of place based food identities and the strengths and weaknesses of the Aalborg foodscape strategy.

### **Introduction**

There is an increasing interest in studying the role of food as part of life in cities and regions and the contribution that food strategies can make to the sustainable development of cities and regions<sup>1</sup>. There is at the same time an increasing interest in understanding the role of foodways in creating urban and regional identities and shaping their cultures<sup>2</sup>. In the same way as architectures and the build environment is contributing to creating the sense of a city, the food life of a city is contributing to creating life “between the building and physical environments” of the city. As such food plays an important role for the design of livable cities. This interest comes not only from urban planners but from a broad range of stakeholders such as for instance food entrepreneurs, farmers, environmentalists and food writers. Increasingly the contribution that the public can make is attracting attention. Food on the public plate is an important part of public welfare systems in the Nordic countries and the public procurement for these services with over six million meals served per day is substantial. As a result, the public through its procurement power has the potential to be able to shape local and regional food economies in a more sustainable way. Furthermore, changing the practices of the public food services in a more sustainable way seem to send an important signal to citizens about its ambitions on the future directions and sustainability of the local food system.

City based food sourcing initiatives introduces a shift in the way in which food are sourced for the public plate since food procurement has traditionally been driven by lowest price in order to comply with the EU procurement directive. The idea of cities and regions driving food procurement policies and thereby impacting the food economies in the region therefore requires practical implementation and change of mindsets and procedures.

The Aalborg foodscape program has been emerging as a case that attempts to reinforce the role of local and regional food as part of the city food identity and to strengthen the role of local and regional producers as suppliers in the public food sector – both in the city as well as in the 10 other municipalities that make up the North region. The city of Aalborg - the 5th largest city of Denmark and the capital of the North region of the country. The region has traditionally played an important role in the Danish food economy but according to Statistics Denmark, the agricultural production in the region of Jutland has decreased with 4.5% in 2015, compared to earlier years. Furthermore, the last 30 years have registered a continuous decrease in agricultural production in the region with more than 60% as it initially was in 1985 (Statistics Denmark). This evidence is addressing the severe situation of local farmers, in particular the one occurring in the North of Jutland. Therefore, there is strong interest in strategies that can develop the local and regional foodscapes. At the same time there is a strong interest in integrating procurement policies into the climate mitigation efforts done by region and municipality. Developing short chain food supply chains for the public sector is seen as one mean to reach that goal

The aim of the study was to uncover the potentials and obstacles of localizing the public food procurement as seen from the different actors' point of view.

### **Conceptual Foundation**

The understanding of the act of human consumption of food has changed over the past decades. From being seen as a simple economic transaction of individuals aimed at maximizing utility the way we see food consumption is now much more complex. This transition in the research related to consumption studies has changed in the wake of the cultural turn<sup>4</sup>. In contemporary perspective consumption is seen as a complex cultural phenomena that is influenced by an economic dimension but also by individual and social norms<sup>3</sup>. Theories of practice has been influential in consumer studies<sup>5</sup> and central to the theories of practice approach is the ability to reveal the understandings, procedures and engagements of those that are carrying out the practices<sup>6,7</sup>. Referred to as the carriers of practice in this context they are representatives from the demand side and the supply side. The actions and practices of these two side together make up the current way of purchasing food for the public plate. Their interplay is at the same time subject to outside pressures and expectations from outside stakeholders. In the case of purchasing food for the public plate consumption is normally referred to as the procurement process to distinguish it from domestic consumption, since it follows a much more structured and contract based pathway. While traditionally seen as optimizing of utility the procurement of public goods has changed dramatically over the past decades to also being aimed at meeting value and norm based objectives such as sustainability and locality.

For this study we use the theories of practices mindset as the conceptual foundation in which we examine the opportunities, barriers and constraints of introducing local produce into the public procurement contracts. Theories of practice are well suited to understand the practices in public procurement as they appear but also to understand the elements of change in relation to these practices<sup>7,8</sup>. Practice theory has been drawing attention as a way to explain doings and sayings of individuals in a wide range of arrays<sup>5,7</sup>. In particular it has been used to explain and understand how human agency shapes consumption<sup>5,7</sup>.

In public procurement important elements of practices involves constructing tenders, checking fidelity of deliveries, purchasing produce in compliance with the rules and regulations regarding

both organics, sustainability and economics, working with the produce in the food service kitchens, maintaining communication between producers and suppliers, establishing feelings of professional pride and visions towards serving tasty food of high nutritional quality.

Theories of practice is theoretically founded in the work of Bourdieu, Schatzki, Reckwitz and has been applied in the consumption studies by Halkier and Warde. Practice theory emphasizes the importance of three elements of practice: Understandings, Procedures and Engagement. Understandings are related to knowing the fundamentals of a practice. Procedures are the know how related to the practice and include instructions, principles and rules of how to conduct a practice. Engagements are essentially exemplifications of emotions and opinions towards the practices that the carriers conduct. Engagements are related to how individuals think about a practice and what norms they attribute to it. Practice theory therefore as Reckwitz puts it includes: *“forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge”*<sup>10</sup>.

Central to the theories of practice approach is to create insight in the understandings, procedures and engagements of those that are carrying out the practices. Referred to as the carriers of practice in this context they are representatives from the demand side and the supply side related to purchasing of public food. Their actions and practices of these two sides as well as their interplay is central to the understanding of how practices are and how they change over time.

## Methods

The methodology used in this study as a way to get this insight into the human agency was semi-structured interviews. The interview strategy for the study focused on sampling informants from both demand and supply side. At the demand side informants who hold the responsibility for the public procurement in different public institutions were invited at the state, municipal and governmental level within Region Nordjylland..

The sampling of informants was structured so that the geographical delimitation was suppliers and food service procurement officials situated in one of the 11 municipalities in Nordjylland Region. The project spans across 3 governmental boundaries since both municipality, region and state operated public food services and as such the foodservice units involved include hospitals, nursing homes, meals-on-wheels facilities and army service canteen facilities. The case has been developing as an action research case in which both university partners, partners from the private sector and public welfare provision partners has engaged in an informal network.

To uncover the views of the professional consumers, their procurement advisors and suppliers a structured interview guide for face to face semi-structured interviews at the demand side was developed in order to assess the pros and cons of local foods in public procurement. In addition to interviews document analysis and observations were carried out.

At *the demand side* three cases of food service all taking place in and around the city of Aalborg were investigated. These three types of public food service were: food for the elderly as operated by the municipality, food for the hospital patients as operated by the region and food for defense staff as operated by the state. Four interviews were performed representing the demand side. The responsible for the cafeteria at the “Department of Defense” in Hjørring, (State level), two representatives from the team in charge of nutrition at foodservice Aalborg (municipal operational

level), a municipal representative from the Network for Sustainable business development in Northern Denmark, a representative from the Municipal Agricultural Department and the University Hospital food service manager (regional level).

At *the supply side* four interviews were conducted with representatives from the local and regional food sector. Three of them local farmers. One of them is a large scale pig farmer and the two others small cattle farmers. The last supply side interview was carried out with a representative from the local food sector network North Jutland Food Association. This organization is known for their work as facilitators to develop the business interests of the food producers in the North of Jutland.

All interviews were carried out in Danish, but the interview guides were translated to English as well. In the cases of the supply side skype technology interviews were applied. The data from the supply side were transcribed from Danish to English. All data were subsequently analyzed in order to identify overarching themes either in terms of enabling and disabling factors for establishing short chain supply.

## Results

Using an approach aiming at identifying enabling and disabling factors and a theories of practice understanding of public procurement we set out to explore the understandings, procedures and engagements of the professionals on the supply as well as on the demand side. On the ladder, we found that understandings of public procurement is undergoing rapid change. Informants expressed the opinion that public procurement has an important role of not only to provide value for public money, but also induce positive and necessary change in the food system. For instance, the interviewee representing the state level, a canteen service manager from the army expressed the view, that the idea of creating a sustainable food identity on the basis of central and agreed values linked to both social and economic benefits is an important responsibility for the procurement official. It reflects an understanding in which the army canteen services is viewed as a role model ‘spearheading the implementation of organic produce’.

More of the informants brought the perceive restrictiveness of the procurement rule to attention. For instance the current state of the public procurement system in Region Nordjylland, is not necessarily seen as the most sustainable approach to procurement. As a result, carriers of practices may not be in alignment with it. For instance, the foodservice manager at Aalborg Hospital expressed the view that procedures of organic food produce procurement is already routinized in a quite restrictive way when it comes to its openness to the idea of short chain local food sourcing . In that sense she is not only a carrier of practice but also a carrier of change since the idea of local supply can be seen as a window of opportunity. Looking at the current policy agenda this window seems to be “open” and the traditionally “frozenness” of the policies of procurement is now ready for “unfreezing” and change. This seems to add more degrees of freedom to the practices and understandings.

Procedures of procurement constitutes the second element of the theories of practice analytical approach. The procedures that exist in relation to the public procurement in Region Nordjylland, is dominated by instructions, principles and rules of how to conduct oneself within the practices. Introducing local produce thus represents an element of change in these procedures. Again the public procurement in the region is challenged by the “frozenness” that is created by rules and regulations and rooted in EU directives and decisions. More interviewees expressed frustration over

the rigidness of these rules and agreements. For instance, the procedures related to the phrasing and wording of the call for tenders sets the rules for what's allowed in the construction of new tenders for the University Hospital. These rules are not seen as supportive to the introduction of more produce of local origin and informants were in agreement that EU-regulations are counterproductive to local food trade arrangements. Another important theme found in the interviews, is that the people involved take a high degree of pride in the fact that the cooking is done by hand, rather than them having to serve preprocessed food. This is an indication of how human agency and engagements can “unfreeze” existing procedures when individuals challenge the system, wanting the ‘turn to quality’ as well as a conversion of the system. The idea of “cooking by hand” for instance was introduced as a policy of foodservice Aalborg. It underlines fluidity of practices and the potential of ‘wants’ from actors such as the staff to initiate change. In this case change in procedures is influenced by the understanding and engagements of the employees, within the practice level of the nursing homes of the municipality of Aalborg.

Engagements is the third important element of the theoretical approach applied in the study. The engagements represents attitudes, norms, emotions and opinions towards the practices that the carriers conduct in relation to procurement. For instance, the representative from the Network for sustainable business development expressed the view that a turn to the local in public procurement is an example of circular economy taken into practice in the form of a corporation that transcends both private and public entities within Aalborg Municipality.

Using the same approach as above, we analyzed the data from interviews with the supply side. The result was remarkable in the sense that compared to the views of the demand side the idea of a short chain supply strategy was considerable more abstract to the supply side. Looking at understandings among the suppliers it became clear that the world of the public plate was unknown territory

According to the interviewees the procedures used in this field was perceived as rather unknown. More of the informants had a vague idea of public procurement contracts as comprehensive and difficult to use in practice. Also informants had reservations since prices obtained in the public system was perceived as too low although none of the interviews actually knew the price level. Procurement was seen as a process full of paperwork process and heavy in terms of legislation

Looking at engagements informants on the supply side was rather positive in terms of the added soft values that short supply chain could bring to the citizens. For instance one supplier expressed the view that for the elderly at the retirement homes it would make a difference since many of these citizens would have emotional bonds with the land in which they grew up. Logistical barriers was seen as another barrier since farmers agreed that for the individual farmer it could be difficult to meet the demand from the public food service. Also concerns for the use of animal products were raised since farmers would hold the opinion that public food services were not good at using the “whole animal” – although again here the informant did not have experience in delivering to the public.

## **Discussion**

Changing procurement strategies means changing food practices at the administrative as well as on at the shop floor level. Using social practice theory allows for an insight into understandings, procedures and engagements related to the professional practices of public procurement<sup>4,6</sup>. It gives in addition a useful conceptual perspective to the evolvement of a region-urban food identity in the

Region Nordjylland with the city of Aalborg as the hub. Practice theory offers a framework that can help explain both how a public food system can be seen as a construct of a routinized type of behavior and how change can take place within the general practices related public procurement<sup>5,7</sup>.

Public Organic Procurement Policy (POPP) represents one of the most studied cases of procurement practice in the Nordic countries<sup>11</sup>. In Denmark, over the past decades, POPPs have come to play an important part of organic food and farming policies, contributing to fulfilling the EU target of 60% usage of organic products by 2020 as agreed upon by the European Commission in 2014. Procurement of organic food for the public plate has acted as a good study case to understand how and why changes in traditional procurement practices can take place in service provision system as that of public food.

The Aalborg case is an example of how the mode of change has been extended from change-to – organic to change-to-local. So far, public food strategies have mainly been looking at the production mode for food and farming (organic versus conventional) and less at the length of the supply chain. This has changed during the past decade and the interest in the “places of food” is growing both among domestic and professional consumers<sup>12,13</sup>. Sustainable food procurement policies with special emphasis on food and place has been developed and implemented in cities such as Toronto, Rome, Milan, Malmø and Copenhagen and this has along with other factors been contributing to changing food from being placeless to being “placed”<sup>14</sup>. In that sense food consumption seems to have been reaching a state where “food have become part of place and place has become part of food”. This development has increasingly integrated city food policy in local and regional food economies and created significant urban- rural food links<sup>13</sup>.

An important part of the short chain sourcing policies is the added emotional value that is created by introducing a local component. Another important component of short chain sourcing policies is the socio-economic opportunity that lies in involving small producers in public procurement contracts<sup>13,15</sup>. Small producers have normally difficulties in meeting the criteria of the call for tenders if they act by themselves. This obstacle can be handled if the food contracts are divided into smaller units or if small producers choose to team up in cooperatives that can answer to the call for tenders.

In our study we find that there is a considerable interest in developing regionally based public food procurement policies among a broad range of actors from the food sector in Region Nordjylland and that there is a belief among the actors that this might contribute positively to creating more sustainable cities in the region. We also find that there seems to be agreement among many actors that the public has an important role to play in developing regional and city based food identities. We further conclude that there is an increasing consensus of the role of place in creating these identities and that having a food identity is considered an important part of city life

We find however a number of obstacles that seems to seriously affect and hinder the creation of such identities and that impedes the public from creating short supply chains with local producers and that legal frameworks and EU regulation are among the most serious ones. On the supply side we find generally positive attitudes towards the idea of creating local publically supported food identities but that for local producers to be able to answer to the calls for shorter chains a much stronger cooperation and integration of the supply is needed.

The use of practice theory as a conceptual framework seems to create a good understanding about how food procurement practices are maintained and how they are subjected to change as a result of both external pressures as well as pressures within the practitioner level. Understanding how changes to professional routines happens<sup>8</sup> as a mix of individual and collective agency is helpful when interventions and policy change is to be implemented.

In conclusion we identified the following five themes as being important to address in the development of city based food procurement initiatives. 1. *Pre competitive partnership working*. Shortening of supply changes in public procurement seldom takes place as a result of new call for tender procedures. Rather they seem to take place as a result of long term pre-contractual process in which concerned change ready actors engage in different kind of network activities. 2. *Workforce development*. New sustainable food procurement practices in many cases makes it necessary to change menus and preparations of meals. New recipe composition requires new knowledge, skills and competencies among the food workers and therefore is workforce development an important part of short supply chain policies. 3. *Loosely coupled systems governance*. The fact that modern food service in many cases is outsourced to 3<sup>rd</sup> parties introduces a certain kind of inertia and resistance towards change. It is therefore important to know about the life cycles of these contracts if procurement practices are to be changed. 4. *Multilayer food procurement alignment*. In most countries the responsibility for public food falls at more governmental levels ranging from the municipal over the regional to the national level. Synchronizing demands using the city as the foundation and doing that across governmental boundaries is a challenging process and requires new procedures of cooperation between civil servants and practitioners between these levels. 5. *Politicizing food services*. Public food has traditionally been regarded as a mundane routine task that can be made subject to routinization. Therefore, making public food subject to policy change and lifting the issue up at a strategic level is not done overnight but requires persistent effort.

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