

Research Project: Sustainable Food Systems - Towards Sustainable School Meals.

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Background: School food has become an iconic issue in the sustainability agenda particularly within Europe, in which issues of health, obesity and learning about food have collided with issues of public procurement, the contracting out of public services and the role of competition regulation. BRASS research has sought to explore the potential for development of more sustainable school meal procurement and the integration of healthy eating dimensions of children's diet at school with consideration of environmental sustainability.

Aims and objectives:

- To assess the possibilities for more sustainable food procurement policies in the light of the recent reform of EU legislation. Does the reform of public procurement regulations in the EU facilitate 'greener', more sustainable public procurement policies, and how will it affect the prospects for purchasing local and 'quality' food in schools? In particular, how does the tension between competitive and sustainability criteria play out in practice?
- To examine how local authorities active in the development of a sustainable school meal system in different regions of the UK and Italy carve their room for manoeuvre in the multi-level policy context in which they operate
- To examine the implications of sustainable food procurement policies for producers, consumers and the local socioeconomic system producer-caterer-consumer relationships in the case study areas? To what extent are local producers and consumers (i.e. children) encouraged to participate in the school meals system?
- To explain the dynamics of school meal provision systems in terms of the influence of food culture and local political strategies, the constraints that local authorities face and seek to explain the evident diversity that exists in a supposedly uniform EU regulatory regime?
- To evaluate specific school meal initiatives and develop tools that can integrate and assess the nutritional and environmental sustainability aspects of school meal schemes;

About the research: The research had a strong comparative dimensions including some Italian Local Authorities who are regarded as leaders in the provision of healthy school meals, along with some Local Authorities in the UK that are also making substantial efforts to address concerns. The research considered non-location specific factors include EU public procurement regulations, national food culture and national regulations along with local factors include the local socioeconomic environment and the political commitment to sustainable development at the municipal level.

There were a number of components to the research. Firstly, an examination of the changing regulatory context of public procurement in the EU was carried out. This was followed by a comparative study of school meals in the UK and Italy within the different political contexts was undertaken. Five detailed case studies were undertaken using local authorities as the unit of analysis. Five places were chosen: 2 from Italy (Rome and Piombino, a small town in Tuscany) and 3 from the UK (South Gloucestershire, Carmarthenshire and East Ayrshire). A study was also undertaken that applied BRASS's ecofootprinting capabilities (see A23) with a dietary analysis to produce a more rounded sustainability orientated analysis of the health and environmental quality of the provision of school meals. BRASS's expertise in the sustainability of school meal systems also led to evaluation work for other organisations.

The main source of data was semi-structured and in-depth interviews with key actors in the EU, Member State and at Local Authority levels, along with documentary analysis of documented

material and grey literature, with focus group based research conducted in two schools in each case study location (encompassing children, parents and teachers). The assessment element of the project focussed on the 'Food for Life Partnership', a five-year Lottery-funded initiative that aims to transform food culture in schools and communities across England. This was led by the Soil Association in partnership with the Focus on Food Campaign, Garden Organic and the Health Education Trust. Prof Kevin Morgan was also part of an assessment of the first *Home Grown School Feeding* project for the World Food Programme involving studies of school food systems in Brazil, India, Ghana, Thailand and South Africa.

Results and outputs: The comparative research in Italy and the UK demonstrated that both countries had a commitment to a more sustainable school meals service, taking a 'whole school' approach and seeking to source local and seasonal food where possible. The key to success was found to be a 'creative procurement policy' that sought to take a holistic view of the food chain and recognised the need to calibrate the management of food production and consumption at a local level. The work combining eco-footprint analysis with nutritional analysis demonstrated the potential for such an integrated analysis to provide policy-makers with a more rigorous and comprehensive assessment of the impacts of school meals.

- Jones, M., Morley, A. et al. (2012), [Food sustainability education as a route to healthier eating: Evaluation of a multi-component school programme in English primary schools](#), *Health Education Research*, 27 (3), 448-458.
- Fairchild, R. and Collins, A. (2011), [Serving up healthy and sustainable school Meals? An analysis of school meal provision in Cardiff \(UK\)](#), *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 13 (3), 209-229.
- Morgan, K. (2011), [The coming crisis of school food: From sustainability to austerity?](#) *Welsh Economic Review*, 22 , 32-35.
- Morgan, K. and Sonnino, R. (2008), [The School Food Revolution: Public Food and the Challenge Of Sustainable Development](#), Earthscan.
- Morgan, K. and Sonnino, R. (2007), [Empowering consumers: the creative procurement of School Meals in Italy and the UK](#), *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 31 (1), 19-25.

Impacts achieved/potential for impact: Findings have been communicated to non-academic users through three high level policy and practice dissemination events held in Cardiff, three UK workshops aimed at local authorities and parent-teacher associations in England, Scotland and Wales, and a BBC sponsored dissemination event. Prof Kevin Morgan (along with his non-BRASS colleague Dr Roberta Sonnino) was awarded the ESRC's 2013 Celebrating Impact Prize in the Public Policy category. This was in recognition of the research's role in helping local and national policy-makers to visualise what a healthier and more sustainable school food service would look like in practice and how the school food chain could be reformed to make it happen. Their study was one of the first to explore the scope for integrating food production and consumption via public procurement. It has enabled the school food policy community at local and national levels to understand the key components of a healthier and more sustainable school food system. Far from being a purely conceptual innovation, the research was also instrumental in re-shaping legislation and enabling behavioural change by exposing policy-makers and professional practitioners to good practice in and beyond the UK. The research led to an invitation to present the findings in New York to two sessions of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development in 2009.