

Urban Public Food Procurement

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Urban public food procurement can address malnutrition and improve the beneficiary experience at public institutions whilst reshaping food systems to be healthier and more sustainable. By developing, improving, and scaling public food procurement, urban governments in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) can reach the most vulnerable whilst improving farmer livelihoods, creating business opportunities, and addressing environmental concerns.

Keywords: public food procurement ; urban food systems ; low- and middle-income countries

1. Multiple Wins from Public Food Procurement

Public food procurement and provision can help bring about food system transformation and address the interconnected malnutrition, noncommunicable diseases (NCD), and climate change crises ^{[1][2]}. The EAT Lancet Commission identified food procurement as a key food system transformation strategy, and in 2021, the United Nations Food Systems Summit launched the Healthy Diets from Sustainable Food Systems Coalition and School Meals Coalition. These two coalitions will promote nutritious food supply chains, farmer livelihood support, environmental protection, healthy food environments, education, and demand generation ^{[3][4]}. These initiatives recognise that establishing new public food procurement programmes and making existing ones more sustainable along economic, social, and cultural lines is one of many tools available to accelerate progress on the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) ^[5]. More generally, public procurement accounts for an estimated 10% to 15% of global gross domestic product (GDP). This proportion is higher in LMICs, where public procurement accounts for 19.3% and 14.9% of the GDP in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, respectively ^[6]. As noted by Torres-Pruñonosa et al. sustainable food procurement fits the broader concept of sustainable public procurement, in which governments purchase goods or services with specifications that require suppliers to meet different dimensions of sustainability. Their bibliometric analysis found that school feeding is one of the main themes within sustainable public procurement literature ^[7].

Public food procurement addresses malnutrition by helping people meet minimum dietary requirements and preventing NCDs. Public food procurement reaches high volumes of people, especially vulnerable groups like girls, women, and people living on a low income. For example, India's Mid-Day Meal Scheme feeds 116 million students ^[8]. Sassoon General Hospital in Pune serves free patient meals co-funded by the regional government and a local non-governmental organisation (NGO). These meals add to social sustainability by improving patient nutrition, aiding recovery, and reducing economic pressure on family members who would otherwise bring food from outside the hospital ^[9]. In one example of how public food procurement could prevent NCDs, a study found that students receiving meals with minimum nutrition standards through Brazil's National School Feeding Programme were less likely to regularly consume sugar-sweetened beverages and ultra-processed foods ^[10]. Public food procurement can also increase human productivity and educational attainment for those receiving food ^[11].

Beyond food consumers, sustainable public food procurement can contribute to environmental sustainability. According to the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, urban food consumption is one strong driver of cities' material flows, carbon footprint, and land footprint ^{[12][13]}. Hence, changing the ways that urban institutions source their food could improve these climate change drivers. In addition, public food procurement can simultaneously reduce food waste at the same time as improving livelihoods by creating guaranteed markets for farmers and food producers. Guaranteed markets can particularly benefit smallholder farmers, such as how Brazil's National School Feeding Programme mandates that 30% of ingredients are purchased from local small farmers ^[14]. Brazil's Institutional Purchase Program offers a 30% price premium for procuring organic-certified or agroecologically-produced products, thereby rewarding farmers for sustainable agricultural practices ^[15]. The World Food Programme (WFP) Purchase for Progress initiative conducts local and regional staple procurement from smallholder farmers to foster local economic empowerment, reduce post-harvest loss, and speed up food aid delivery ^[16]. Therefore, public food procurement can jointly enhance environmental and economic sustainability.

In general, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) defines sustainable and resilient city regional food systems as driving food access, generating decent jobs and income, increasing resilience, fostering rural–urban linkages, promoting agroecological diversity, and supporting participatory and inclusive governance [17]. Various urban public food procurement programmes attempt to meet multiple goals jointly. Cities participating in the C40 Cities network and Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP) are working on public food procurement to further sustainable diets [18][19]. The Purchase from Africans for Africa pilot project demonstrated potential ways to jointly promote nutritious food demand and procurement through local farmers and farmer organisations. This programme supported home-grown school feeding (HGSF) programmes in Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique, Niger, and Senegal [20]. Mozambique's experience with the programme indicates the need for joint policy, and institutional and legal capacity-building, such as to formalise farmer organisations, improve quality control, and improve public procurement procedures and local management [21].

2. The role of Urban Governance in Low- and Middle-Income Countries

In addition to multiple forms of inequality, most low- and middle-income country (LMIC) cities face the double burden of malnutrition, where undernutrition (e.g., stunting, wasting, or micronutrient deficiencies) coexists with overnutrition (overweight and obesity) [22][23]. Despite these challenges, urban governments are well-positioned to create and improve food procurement programmes due to their roles in managing and financing public institutions. They can also innovate and exceed national policies [24]. For example, Addis Ababa established a dedicated school feeding agency in 2019 to feed all 351,000 public school students from preschool to eighth grade [9]. In 2017, Quito began working with the Ecuador Ministry of Health to improve school meals according to national school feeding nutrition guidelines [25]. In another example, Quezon City signed the C40 Good Food Cities Declaration and plans to bring public food procurement in line with the Sustainable Consumption and Production Principles developed through a South-South cooperation network to promote sustainable diets and reduce food waste [26].

There is emerging global guidance for public food procurement, particularly from the World Health Organisation (WHO)'s "Action Framework for Developing and Implementing Public Food Procurement and Service Policies for a Healthy Diet", and FAO's "Home Grown School Feeding Resource Framework" [11][27]. These frameworks discuss national-level best practises and lessons from LMICs. Indeed, WFP helped Kenya establish its Home-Grown School Meals Programme in 2009 to feed 1.6 million children. In 2018, Kenya transitioned to national ownership and adopted its National School Meals and Nutrition Strategy. Kenya's national school feeding programme primarily covers 1.6 million children living in arid and semi-arid lands [28][29].

There continues to be a need for more literature on urban public food procurement in LMICs. FAO and the Alliance of Bioversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) have provided further evidence and experiences in their publication "Public Food Procurement for Sustainable Food Systems and Healthy Diets". Though the publication includes several LMIC case studies, such as an HGSF pilot in Busia County in Kenya, they point out that public food procurement research, data, and reporting remain limited [5][30]. Further, a systematic review highlighted gaps in literature on school food and workplace food environments in LMICs [31]. Molin et al. conducted a systematic review about sustainability in public food procurement and found that a minority of articles cover African and Asian countries [32]. Yet, public food procurement programmes already exist and innovate within their local contexts in LMICs, and can cultivate further progress through sharing experiences and best practices. It is for this reason that there continue to be opportunities for further urban public food procurement research across multiple geographies, institution types, and research modalities to best understand how to implement and scale up sustainable public food procurement.

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