

# CORE Organic

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## Providing organic school food for youths in Europe – Policy strategies, certification and supply chain management in Denmark, Finland, Italy and Norway

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# Ecological modernisation in the public catering sector – Danish experiences with use of organic food

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper we use the concept of ecological modernisation as frame to understand the relationship between two parallel developments in the public catering sector, namely the *sustainability discourse* and the *rationalisation discourse*. We argue that the two tendencies are increasingly merging. The focus is on organisational changes in the public sector in a sustainable perspective. This paper was produced as a part of the iPOPY project, where work package 2 "Policy analysis" studies efficient strategies to increase public consumption of organic food especially in public procurement for youth.

Danish municipalities feed daily hundreds of thousands citizens at schools, kindergartens, elderly homes, hospitals etc. Even though the cost to this food service only account for a small share of the total cost of the institutions, huge efforts have been made to "slim" this area, especially up through the 1990s. A wave of consultancy reports based on the analysis of operations swept especially the larger institutional kitchens nationwide in that decade and reports in general recommended a common cure: to introduce large-scale operations and to reduce the number of kitchens, to cut the number of employees in order to enhance productivity, to implement new catering technologies with a longer shelf life in order to increase productivity and to increase the use of semi produced foods thereby lowering labour costs.

However, parallel to this dominating *rationalisation discourse* in the food service sector a number of signs have indicated an emerging "anti-wave". We call this anti-wave the "*sustainable discourse*". It is characterised by focusing on a wider notion of food and meal quality including aspects such as a wish to implement healthier nutrition, introduces higher food quality standards, building competence for employees, implement organic procurement schemes, introduce "gastronomic" initiatives, involve wider factors such as eating surroundings and environment – all factors that can be contained in the notion a democratisation of the food service area in which employees is given the opportunity to develop the quality of their working lives and at the same time to develop the quality of the service they are involved in.

We want to discuss whether the struggle between the two discourses that has been taking place over a decade in public food service has resulted in a trend that some theorists have coined *ecological modernisation*. Could it be argued that some of these initial intentions that wanted to change the food service sector into a more sustainable direction, have been mainstreamed and absorbed in the established food service regime where rationalisation and effectiveness are the main goals?

Our point of departure is that it is meaningful to speak about an actual environmental transformation or change in essential parts of the societal institutions and their mutual division of labour – a change from external environmental regime to internal environmental regime. Mol sees environmental considerations as a sphere which used to be marginalised, but slowly is being embedded in the economic institutions as an equal partner. They claim that the environment will restructure the economic processes with ecological criteria and goals, and that environmental considerations gradually will restructure the economic processes with ecological criteria and objectives (Mol 1995). This is what happened when the environmental regime shifts from external to internal, e.g. when the municipal decide to introduce organic foods in the municipal institutions.

Mol identifies four common characteristics for projects that are part of an ecological modernisation. *Firstly* ecological modernisation argues that modern science and technology are principal institutions in greening economy (Mol 1995). This is in contrast to the former "end-of-pipe" solutions<sup>1</sup>. *Secondly* ecological modernisation stresses the importance of the dynamics of the market, and the importance of market actors as drivers of ecological restructuring. *Thirdly* the role of state in the ecological modernisation is to guide and outline a direction of development. This is in contrast to the former role of the state as commanding and

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<sup>1</sup> End-of-pipe solutions refer to arrangements that prevent the waste to be spread in the nature (e.g. filters), but don't intend to stop the production of waste, like *cleaner technologies*.

centralising. Some areas are left to the market e.g. certifications or formulated requirements to the suppliers. *Fourthly* the NGO's role is changing from opponents to co-players in establishing a new sustainable development and support from citizens. The NGO has resigned its initial role of criticizing the "project of industrialisation".

## **2. The sustainability discourse**

With the Rio Declaration from 1992, many governments all over the world have committed themselves to work for sustainable development. The declaration emphasizes that both production and patterns of consumption have to change in order to achieve this goal. One of the most important areas, both socially and environmentally, is the manufacturing and consumption of food, and thus increased production and consumption of organic food represent important contributions to reduce the negative environmental impact of food production. Accordingly, a number of governments in Europe have created action plans and set up concrete goals for the conversion of conventionally grown agricultural land to organically grown (Znaor 2001). In a number of countries, strategies have also been generated for distributing and marketing of food originating from organic farms; these include, among other things, strategies for the reorientation of the public food consumption towards organic food (Laberenz/ Naatz 2000, Nielsen et al. 2002, Rech 2002).

Whereas the majority of the European organic conversion processes within public sector catering seems to get political support in order to improve public health or the marketing of rural agri-businesses, it is the protection of groundwater from the seepage of pesticides and nitrogen and other environmental aims that have been the point of departure in the Danish case. In order to raise the use of organic food in the food service sector the Danish government in 1997 decided to put aside € 5,000,000, and later a further € 1,500,000, towards the reorientation of organic products in the local municipal authorities titled "green procurement" (Hansen et al. 2008). In Denmark, the relatively small kindergartens and day nurseries have seriously embraced the challenge of implementing organic food. The difficulties with the process of organic conversion seem to be proportional to the size of the kitchen, but new projects indicate that even the large hospital kitchens can reach an organic percentage within the existing budgets (Hansen et al. 2008).

Through the 1980s a number of food service kitchens implemented organic food in their operations, even without public support. The driver for these initiatives was a wish to maintain a sustainable operation of food service and most of the institutions had a pedagogical, educational or social objective.

The use of organic food in many of these institutions became mainstream and the organic procurement policy was seen as an obvious way of taking their values and principles from policy into daily life by integrating the history and traceability of products into food service operations. In many cases local food supply initiatives were an integral part of alternative projects. Such projects were mostly bottom up approaches involving grassroots such as students, parents etc. as opposed to many top down projects that had only limited public appeal (Mikkelsen 2004, Nielsen et al. 2002).

The health and environmental issues that appear on the agenda in the 1990s were another important driver for the engagement that many food service professionals showed towards an organic conversion. Especially the fear of pesticide residues entering into water supply reservoirs was seen as a potential risk (Elle 2004).

Vejle and Copenhagen municipalities as well as Western Zealand County were examples of projects in which the initiative came from above. A characteristic of these projects was the very ambitious nature of the projects and the involvement of high-level bureaucrats and politicians. Many of these were a part of a strategic Agenda 21 policy in which organic procurement was seen as an important element (Kristensen/ Nielsen 2007). A characteristic was also that goals for the share of organic food were very ambitious ranging from 30 to over 80 percent. Fredericia municipality decided in 1994 that half of the public procurement should be organic at the end of the project (Hansen 1996).

The top down approaches initiated in the late nineties resulted in a boost of the organic procurement in food service because contrary to the small scale bottom up initiatives these top down projects had much more impact on the supply side. The latest Danish example of top down initiative is the "Healthy School meals in Copenhagen" (KØSS) program, which was initiated by the municipality of Copenhagen. The aim of the program is to allow school children to develop healthy eating habits; emphasising healthy and mainly organic food. By end of 2009 60 percent of all the food ingredients used by the Copenhagen institutions is intended to be organic, and the goal is 90 percent in 2015. The municipality finances the establishment of stalls or canteens in the schools, but the users have to finance the operation of the system (Hansen et al. 2008).

### 3. The rationalisation discourse

In general we have seen tendencies to incorporate a management philosophy to modernize the Danish Public Sector since the 1980s. These tendencies of public reforms have been called New Public Management (NPM). Taking the departure in public choice and managerial schools, NPM seeks to enhance the efficiency of the public sector and the control that government has over it. The idea of NPM is that a more market-orientated public sector could lead to higher cost-efficiency, without having negative side effects on other objectives and considerations. In the New Public Management citizens are typically regarded as customers, and the idea of applying more competition is seen an important way to boost the efficiency of the public sector.

One of the problems of New Public Management is the need for greater inspection and supervision due to less clarity, but also miscalculation of public opinion, which does not always seek for more efficiency but rather political solutions (Elle 2004).

Consultants rigorously carried out rationalisation projects during the 1990s, which were fuelled by a growing focus on the sector and its services. The idea of consultants riding the rationalisation wave was that through the appliance of evidence based and scientific approaches to food service management a better overall performance could be achieved through the use of more rational planning and better operational techniques. The appliance of these new "scientific" methods in almost all cases resulted in substantial workforce cuts. These cuts were very visible to the stakeholders in the sector because nearly half of the resources used for food service are labour costs. Thus the word quickly began to spread in municipalities and counties that consultants' analysis was a shortcut to substantial cost-cuts.

In the rationalisation approach the up scaling of food service operations were central (Kryger/Olsen 1987). Within the nursing sector, central production units were built to serve a number of smaller satellite nursing homes and home living elderly – a service known as meals on wheels. Most of these new scientific solutions were based on cook and chill technology in which large amounts of prepared meals could be held for up to 72 hours before serving (Warde/Martens 1998). This technology revolutionised the kitchens because for the first time production and serving could be separated in space as well as in time. Thus the traditional concept of production by which the meals were kept hot until consumed widely known as cook, hold and serve or simply cook serve became more and more problematic because of the competition from cook and chill and the increasing centralisation of production (Zinck 1995, Creed 2001).

At the same time food industry realised the potential hidden in developing convenience meals, meal elements and semi prepared meals for food service since the wish to cut labour costs were paramount (Mikkelsen et al. 2004). Because of the effects of specialisation and economies of scale, the caterers assumed control over still larger parts of food preparation, offering technologies and less kitchens (Creed 2001).

### 4. Results

According to the ecological modernisation we find that the early alternative projects up to the middle of the 1990s are different compared to the "new ecological projects" later on. We tried to identify the four factors Mol uses for the definition of ecological modernisation:

1) In the food service sector modern management theories and new technological solutions are seen as an important way to improve the environmental performance. Cleaner technology is one example of how technology and science are used to reduce waste and electricity in the kitchens. Several research and development projects were initiated. In the "new ecological projects" these more advanced environmental tools have been integrated in the projects. This has on one side broadened the projects with respect to other environmental impacts e.g. transport, but also limited the focus to elements which were measurable like CO<sub>2</sub> emission, waste, etc.

2) The market became a central factor when the discussion is about transformation from conventional to ecological food. The focus has increasingly been set on price and suppliers of the organic products. Market actors play an ever larger role in many of the projects. From the mid 1990s several private companies (processors, retailers) and consultants followed in the aftermath of the organic conversion projects.

3) The state (municipalities or counties) has increasingly been involved into the "ecological projects" and is seeking to involve the relevant actors, both market actors and citizens/NGOs. This has especially been the

case with some environmental/organic organisations. Especially the larger municipalities were actively pushing "organic projects" in the mid 1990s, and often in cooperation with central market actors (processors, suppliers, etc) and some of the environmental organisations. The KØSS-case of Copenhagen is an example of this.

4) NGOs have also changed their role over the last twenty years. They became active players in the development towards a sustainable society contrary to earlier social movement that had fought against the industrialisation project. The organic movement is an example for this transformation. This movement has its roots in the critique of capitalism. By now, it is partly integrated in the traditional agricultural organisations and is mainly focusing on activities related to the demand for organic products, and here the organic catering projects have become interesting.

The organic projects and some of the ideas behind the projects have to some extent been assimilated to the dominant understanding of environment, especially in the public administration. In the last years these ecological projects became a central part of the environmental performance of the municipalities.

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