

# 1<sup>st</sup> Nordic Organic Conference



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*Vägen till ökad  
uthållighet i  
livsmedelskedjan*

*Towards increased  
sustainability in the  
food supply chain*

*Vejen til en øget  
bæredygtighed i  
fødevarekeden*

*Veien til økt  
bæredyktighet i  
matvarekjeden*

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# The iPOPY project and how to communicate with the young generation

Public food service has been recognized as a promising arena for advancing sustainable development and changing the way people eat (Morgan & Sonnino, 2008). This paper explores communication with young people based on findings from the ongoing iPOPY- “innovative Public Organic food Procurement for Youth” project, which focuses on organic food in public food service for young people. We explore dimensions of communication with young people about organic food and sustainability in school and festival settings, based on iPOPY cases.

## **iPOPY project – a CORE Organic pilot project**

The aim of the iPOPY project (2007–2010) is to study how increased consumption of organic food may be achieved by implementation of relevant strategies and instruments linked to food serving outlets for young people in some European countries (Denmark, Finland, Italy and Norway). Supply chain management, procedures for certification of serving outlets, stakeholders’ perceptions and participation as well as the potential of organic food in relation to health and obesity risks are analysed. Because schools are central arenas for public food procurement for children and adolescents the project focuses on organic food served in schools. In addition to schools/municipalities in Denmark, Finland, Italy and Norway, a Finnish congregation and a Norwegian music festival are used as cases for public serving outlets for young people. More information about the project can be found at the iPOPY website <http://www.ipopy.coreportal.org/>. (Løes & Nölting, 2009)

## **Communication**

Communication has widely been viewed as transmission of information (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). The communication act is understood as a system which comprises of information, encoded and imparted by a sender to a receiver via a channel. This approach has often been used to study how the encoded message remains ‘unchanged’ as it passes in the channel from the sender to the receiver.

Contemporary communication theorists treat communication as a social system within which information and meanings are continuously processed and transformed. In this social system, construction of social reality gives us the basic shared understanding about what is meant by our lives and world (Berger & Luckmann, 1968), but in the conditions of late modernity, characterized by scepticism, individual freedom and active trust (Beck *et al.*, 1994), this understanding evolves as interplay of individual and socially shared interpretations of information and meanings. Here, communication is understood as that which becomes shared and is therefore publicly known and available (Luhmann, 1989). Finally, communication may be seen as means to ends, whereby communication adopts a more or less persuasive character, responded by receivers in more or less complying ways.

Combining these theoretical strands, communication can be studied as a system of transmission of information whereby this information is invested by meaning and aim by the sender and processed to possibly new

meanings and altered compliance with sender's aims by the receivers. A central part in this model is 'the information', which may consist of textual, visual and sensory elements experienced by the receiver.

This paper explores communication about organic food to young people on two arenas where organic food is served either as public or commercial service: a Finnish upper secondary school and a Norwegian music festival. The study is structured around the caterer as the sender (aim, information and food), and experience and interpretation of the message by young people as receivers. The study is based on focus group discussions with young people (aged 16–25 years), individual interviews with caterers and observations conducted in 2008.

### **Finnish school meal – institutional message and pupils' experiences and interpretations**

The Finnish school meal system represents a highly regulated practice aiming at academic performance and public health, and already in 1948 free school meals in primary education became the statutory liability for municipalities (Lintukangas *et al.*, 2007).

The 'institutionalised' offer of free school meals represents national food culture (rotating menu) and follows national nutritional recommendations. The school meal is also meant to be a relaxing and revitalising social break. Furthermore, the "whole school approach" (Morgan & Sonnino, 2008) aims to connect education in biology, geography, health and home economics with school meal implementation, with a model meal in the dining hall visualizing the 'proper balanced meal'. More specifically, education includes some knowledge on agriculture including organic food as well. The implementation of the school meal presents an institutionally powered message of healthy, nutritional, tasty, hygienic, free and scheduled warm lunch as an epitome of well-being for young people (Lintukangas *et al.*, 2007).

The handbook for school meals refers to the concept of sustainable development and recommends, if possible, to use local food (Lintukangas *et al.*, 2007). Organic food is not mentioned in the handbook. However, there are public caterers who express their concerns for both young people's health and depletion of natural resources and who use domestic or organic food for school meals (Mikkola, 2009). In this way, the "institutional organic message" can be described as basically positive, to some extent reserved, and ambiguous about organic food;

simultaneously, there is in some cases critical relation towards conventional food. This message is mixed, but it gives room for the use of organic food as a material and experiential message as well as information through text books, projects and lectures.

Young people's experience and interpretation of the organic message have several analytical dimensions. First, they referred to particular nice occasions in one's life history such as participation in organic meal preparation with particular persons. The school meal was, when compared with these experiential memories, suspected to be non-organic due to the low cost focus of Finnish school food service. The young people also expressed that they did not see a point in asking whether it was organic, since this hardly would change the way the procurement was run. However, school food seemed to have rather high relevance to the everyday well-being of the young people because they discussed it intensively and made detailed evaluations of it.

The pupils reflected on organic food as compared with conventional food and concluded, that the crops must be smaller than in conventional agriculture since organic is more pricey. They were aware and saw it as positive that no pesticides and fertilizers had been used in production; this fact also raised questions about the necessity of pesticides. The somewhat ambiguous understanding of organic food was also connected with curiosity about its quality. The commonplace expression of 'future with organic' appeared to attract them. The announcement of an organic trial in the school caused welcoming aplauds and suggestions for what the organic foods could be.

The content of education seemed to be restricted to organic labels, learning about organic foods in the local supermarket and project work. The young people themselves paid attention to the neutral content of education without any attempts to 'influence' their buying behaviour.

The organic message, received both in and outside the school where young people are exposed to many competing messages, was interpreted positively, with some ambiguity in terms of quality and the selection on the market. However, there was no big contrast to the culturally powerful institutional message of healthy school meals.

### Organic food in a Norwegian festival context – message and perceptions

Festivals are collective events that can be understood as arenas for social learning and opportunities to experiment with pleasure and meaning (Purdue *et al.* 1997). Being at the Øya music festival, one of the cases in the iPOPYPY project, provides young people an opportunity to taste and experience organic food, which may effect perceptions and learning about organic food (Roos *et al.* 2009).

Since 2003 Øya has aimed at serving organic food prepared by local restaurants. The menus are certified and labelled ([www.debio.no](http://www.debio.no)). In addition, posters with a text informing what organic food is have been placed by the food booths and special stands can be visited for more information. The festival magazine and the book to volunteers include information about organic food. The volunteers have access to free organic food when working.

The young Øya participants described the festival as a positive experience, and thus organic food got a positive association. Organic food was viewed as different from conventional food, and there seemed to be an expectation that it would be better for themselves, animals or environment, or taste better. But not all were sure about what made organic food different and why. There was a shared opinion that organic food is more expensive, and that the food sold at Øya festival was small portions for a lot of money.

Some of the participants, especially the volunteers, had noted the information on organic food, but others had not registered the posters or even that the food was organic. It did not seem like the experiences with organic food at the festival had had a direct effect on their consumption of organic food. There were mixed views on the transmission of organic food from festival to everyday context; some thought organic festival food had a positive effect, whereas others described festivals as separate worlds with limited influence. Festival food was mainly associated with necessity, fuelling the body and high price.

### Conclusion

Two cases from the iPOPYPY project demonstrate that when communicating with the younger generation organic food messages are competing with other messages also in protected food environments, and the sender and receiver attach different meanings to organic food. Our findings contribute to emphasizing the relevance of holistic approaches (e.g. whole school approach) and experiential activities in introducing organic food to young people.

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