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Organic Food for Youth in Public Settings: Potentials and Challenges. Preliminary Recommendations from a European Study

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iPOPY



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Lessons learned from implementing organic into European school meals – policy implications

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Abstract

The introduction of organic food offers new dimensions to school meals, and schools offer new dimensions to organic food – when tackled properly. In this paper we will present findings from the iPOPY research project that is funded by the ERA-Net, CORE-Organic-I funding body network. It is based on studies of school food policies in Denmark, Finland, Italy and Norway. The embedded food traditions and cultures have had different attention in these countries, why also food related consumption, institutions and markets are quite heterogeneous and dynamic. Whereas school food services are relatively widely embedded in the school systems in Finland and Italy, the Danish and Norwegian school food is predominantly defined by the packed lunch brought from home when it comes to organic food the pattern is different. To analyse the strategies used in these countries we have selected a number of cases where in-depth studies have been conducted. The concept of embedding has been used in these studies and it has been informed by policy and actor network theories. The results of this analysis show a complexity in implementing organic food in existing school food aims, in embedding school food policies and in comprising also aims and policies for organic food purchasing in these. The variety amongst the analysed countries in strategies and success is identified, covering both structural and stakeholder related findings. A major finding is pointing at the challenge of “multi-embedding” processes when including organic food in school meal procurement.

1. Introduction

The daily meal for school children is a subject that has a considerable public attention in many countries these years. The discussions are often related to the considerations of how to secure pupils a healthy and genuine and tasty meal. The concept of “a proper meal” tends to become an obligatory passage point for this attention, which also qualifies to bridge to other agendas such as food culture, tackling poor or no lunch for school children, etc. (Morgan & Sonino 2008). Especially the upcoming obesity and overweight problems among children has caught attention. On the national level, different policies, cultures and traditions determine the frame for developing school food systems as we will see in this study of four different countries and a number of different local school food schemes within these countries. Also on the local or regional administrative level many different aims and systems occur.

In some countries there has in recent years been a focus on organic school food, and this topic has been the basis for the iPOPY research project. This paper present a part of the research conducted in the iPOPY project where the focus has been on the character and implications of various organic school food systems, and the embedding of organic food in these systems by analysing various factors in (e.g. economic, structural, regulatory, cultural). In this paper it is mainly the policy- and embedding aspects of the organic school food, which are presented but the research project have four other approaches regarding organic school food: the supply chain aspects in relation to organic food supply for school food systems, the pedagogical and learning ability aspects of eating organic school food, and the health aspects of organic school food.¹

One important dimension in the examination of school food systems is that educational institutions are regarded as key carriers of cultural values and therefore local, regional, national and international decision makers get involved in school policies. Agendas raised in modern society are therefore also often addressing the school setting - the health and obesity discussions are two recent examples. The food consumed at school therefore also has a more symbolic meaning than merely the material and nutritional dimension.

¹ See more description of the iPOPY research project at <http://ipopy.coreportal.org/>

2. Methods

Four countries have been examined in relation to selected organic school food systems – Italy, Finland, Norway and Denmark. Data have been collected for this study through national data reports that have been conducted by all national partners in the iPOPYP project on the basis of tailored data collection and reporting guidelines (Kristensen et al 2007) mapping and analysing the state-of-art of organic school food schemes in Denmark, Finland, Italy and Norway (Nielsen et al 2009). These data reports have been complementary with qualitative case studies in ten selected municipalities with experiences in organic school food, and carried out in by individual face-to-face interviews, observations, telephone interviews and literature (including internet) studies. Also research interviews have informed this qualitative data collection. The informants have been key persons in school administration, (food) procurement, strategic departments and in central administrations in municipalities, regions, provinces and states. Informants also represent some of the local institutions and food manufacturing and distribution. The ongoing project will by these data and aspirations inform a final comprehensive analysis on POP policies, that will be published as an outcome of this research.

When studying the POP policies in different school food systems in a number of countries it is obvious that there are different structures and contexts, but also different actors and processes when it comes to the visions and implementation of these into reality. The policy approach to the embedding of organic food in school meal schemes is based on an analytical understanding of the stakeholder roles in transforming systems.

The theoretical-analytical concept of embeddedness is central in these studies but will not be further unfolded and elaborated here. This theoretical-analytical concept has been shaped through more than five decades. Initiated in studies on how economic attitudes and practices is being social embedded have been fairly discussed, and Polanyi (1944) and later Granovetter (1985) have been known as some of the initial key theorists for understanding how economic practices have become embedded in social practices. In modern society meal in public schools seem to become employed through many economic, social and re-structuring process. In this paper we will primarily draw on newer theories on embedding processes as they have been developed further. Amongst these is also the concept of structuration (Giddens 1984) helpful in unfolding the role of different institutions and agencies as it offers relevant perspectives in relation to analysing the development and growth of school meal practices and the development and expansion of the use of organic food in school meals (Sonnino 2007). Policies and strategies for school food reflect differences in complexity and dynamism in these years in many countries. In this context the concept of embeddedness will be suggested to describe to what extent the school food systems in the four countries is reflected in the regulatory and public policies, the economic and the civil society levels and administrative practice.

3. Results and discussions of food systems and agents

The study has uncovered some major characteristics in the school meal systems. Besides these similarities there are also some differences between these countries. These will be presented in the following.

In Italy (Bocchi et al 2008) the school food is the responsibility of the municipality and since Italy has more than 800 municipalities there are many different systems. There has in recent years been a national focus on quality aspects of the school food, and organic products have had national attention. The food is partly paid by the parents and partly supported by the municipality or the region/state. There is a graduated payment according to the income of the parents. The Italian school food is prepared in municipal and private central kitchens or locally at the schools as the dominating ways. The focus of the iPOPYP research project has mainly been on cases in Northern Italy and Rome where some interesting development trends have been available for the study. In Milan the school food system has an increasing focus on price, which decreases the quality and share of organic products, while Rome has a very high attention on organic and local products that increases the expenses for the municipality quite dramatically.

In Finland the school food is free of charge for all pupils, as it is fully financed through the tax-payment (Mikkola 2008). The system has a top-down approach where especially health and nutritional aspects dominate the way the actors consider the food. The menus are planned according to the 'plate model' (Tikkanen 2009) as the dominating approach towards the planning of the food, where the plate should be filled with about 50% potatoes or rice, 25% fish or meat and 25% vegetables. The food is often prepared in a municipal kitchen although major external suppliers are also increasingly on the market due to a sometimes cheaper tender offer than the municipal kitchens. In Finland there is reported very little attention on organic foods.

In Norway, school food is generally not very high on the national agenda, although one of the parties participating in the actual government, which has been governing since 2005, fronted a free, warm meal for all pupils very high when they were first elected (Løes et al 2008). Trondheim municipality has a goal to increase organic school food, and our studies show that such an ambition is hampered by a range of challenges. In Norway, the packed lunch is extended by subscription schemes for milk and fruit, which is served in the schools. Parents pay a major part of the costs of the milk scheme. Only a few municipalities offer organic school milk, and due to very high premium prices the consumption of organic school milk is rapidly decreasing. As especially teen-agers tend to eat little fruit and vegetables and leave the packed lunch at home, schools with a lower secondary level (class 8-10) get the fruit for free, paid by the government. Elsewhere the parents pay for the fruit.

Denmark has the same traditions as Norway, which means that there are almost no schools with canteen facilities (Hansen et al 2008). At the same time there has been some political attention towards school food, and especially in the municipalities near Copenhagen also towards organic school food since the mid 90'ies when the state introduced subsidies for use of organic foods in public institutions (kindergartens, elderly homes, schools etc). The discrepancy between the dominant lunch package culture and the wish for more school food served at the schools has been giving some challenges for the schools. The system in Denmark is based on parent payments. For some municipalities there are different kinds of municipal support to the canteens.

To sum up, in *Italy*, the full warm meal system is well established. The operational management of the school meal procurement is decentralized and organized at the local municipal level. In *Finland*, the warm meal system is well established and has a long history just as in *Italy*, but the school meal system is much more centralized. Important decisions about the regulatory framework such as nutritional recommendations, in-house food safety control, or mandatory vocational curriculum for the employees are taken at the national level. In general, *Finland* can be characterized as having a scientific management approach, where *Italy* tends to have strong elements of an artisan approach. In *Denmark*, the additional food and meal system is negotiated at the moment; rather many local initiatives try to extend the school food procurement into the direction of full warm meals. In *Norway*, food procurement is mainly restricted to milk and fruit schemes.

In both Italy (Bocchi et al 2008) and Finland (Mikkola 2008), school food is an important part of the school day (Nielsen et al., 2009). Usually a warm meal is served in a canteen for almost all pupils. Contrary to this, Norway (Løes et al 2008) and Denmark (Hansen et al 2008) are dominated by a system where lunch packages are brought from home and often eaten in the classroom. Additionally there is often a small stall or booth where it is possible to buy supplement snacks or drinks. In Denmark, some municipalities (primarily the bigger of these) are introducing prepared warm school meals but it is not yet the dominating picture throughout the country. In Norway there are almost only systems with lunch packages in the primary and lower secondary schools, and some more canteens in the higher secondary schools.

3.1 Stakeholders and strategies involved

The major actors in the school meal systems are confronted with market issues, regulatory issues and civil society issues. These will be identified country wise in the following, as we here have relative different roles for the dominating actor groups.

Normally in most European countries equipment and education is tax financed, but in our study we find that when introducing food service systems to public schools, an economic public controversy is introduced to the schools. Finland is one of the exceptions here. This controversy is especially found where user payment is practiced, in Italy and Denmark but also relevant for the Norwegian milk and fruit schemes. The controversy is related to the relation between the price and the quality. One of the elements in this is related to the fact that if the food is too expensive the sale will drop. If the quality in the other hand is too low, or the food is not popular among the pupils, the sale will also drop. In *Denmark*, there is an expectation that the price per meal cannot be above 3 € if a certain level of sale is to be expected. In Italy, the user payment has quite different expressions since Rome has chosen to fix the price on 2 €. Currently, Rome municipality has to pay 3 € for each meal just in order to cover the food expenses. In Milan on the other hand the parents pay almost all the expenses, so the costs per meal are about 5 €. The focus on reducing costs has diminished the organic share and the quality of the food. In Finland school food is an integrated part of being in school and the expenses are covered by the state.

The regulatory issue shows some differences in the way that the systems are organized. In Italy and especially in Finland there is a top-down approach towards the implementation of school meals. This means

that the state level for Finland and the municipal level for Italy have the major decision-making power. In Denmark and Norway to some extent, there is at the same time a political wish of school meals for all pupils, but also an ideology of the free choice for everyone, which makes the decision-making power more diffuse and decentralized. This combined with the strong culture of lunch packages makes it difficult to introduce the meals at the schools. Interestingly these differences also relate to some different reactions at the civil society actor level, that is parents and other civil society actor groups related to school meals. At the school level, the roles of the school head masters and teachers are generally defined via a top-down hierarchy in Italy and Finland and here there is not room for a lot of reaction from school employees or pupils. In Norway and Denmark on the other hand these actors can play a very important positive or negative role regarding the implementation and support to the system. The Danish cases show that the attitudes among teachers, school head masters and pupils means a lot in relation to the success of a school meal system.

The differences between the systems may also be explained through the civil society actors' commitment. In Italy and Finland there is an expectation from the parents that their children will get a proper meal at school, but it seems as if there is not much activism or involvement among the parents in relation to school meals – especially in Finland. Our studies show that Italian parents are rarely aware of the organic share of the products used in the school meals. However, there is a canteen commission at almost all schools and here parents can be heard in relation to the school food. The School commissions mostly deal with the food quality on a basic level.

In Finland there are almost no parental voices in relation to for example the quality or to the organic share of products. Most parents seem to be satisfied with the possibility of their children getting a warm meal at the school, and it seems as if the system is generally supported by parents.

In Denmark and Norway there are some private organizations and some politicians supporting the introduction of school food, and also a quite lively debate about food for children. This may be connected to the less embedded school food systems in these countries which makes debate more obvious and maybe more necessary. An exception though is the Norwegian organization for all Norwegian parents of school children. They have not expressed any public opinion about school meals. This confirms the overall picture of Norway as a country where the lunch package still is most dominating and accepted cultural norm. However, this organization is generally not a very active civil actor in the Norwegian society. Pupils' parents is a rapidly changing group with highly diverse opinions and it is a challenging task to act on behalf of such a group of people, in spite of the many interests they should have in common (Mari Gret et al 2010).

3.2 Embedding organic food in the school meals

In the former description it seems as if the two top-down managed systems in Italy and Finland naturally are the most embedded systems. Especially in Finland there is a very articulated, law-based and institutionalised system with the major focus on nutrition and scientific management aligning a so-called 'plate-model' for the content of the school meals. The school food is free in the sense that it is paid by the public school budget. The price focus is kept via public tenders, and quite important as for example organic food is almost absent. In Italy there is a quite complex system of regulatory units on the four levels: state, province, region and municipality. There are differences from place to place how much the school food is prioritised, but on the regional level as in some regions of Northern Italy, organic and local food is important issues and much creativity has been in place to assure the organic and local food is served to pupils.

On the other hand the involvement of parents and other civil actors are seemingly more reduced in these countries. Organic food can therefore be characterized as relatively weak embedded in the Finnish institutions, whereas in Italy the indications of embeddedness is established through manifest laws and regulations – which all though seem weak implemented on the some regulatory levels (and without sanction), on the distribution of the economy (support), on the share of organic products and on the regional origin.

We find that if the degree of embeddedness of the systems is connected to the lack of public support on one or more of these indicators of embeddedness, or to whether the local public decision makers may prefer some other priorities than what is stated from the higher political and regulatory levels. The embeddedness of organic food in schools in Denmark and Norway is obviously quite weak at the regulatory level. But in both countries there has been a political wish both nationally and locally in relation to organic school food, hence when it comes to the practical actions it has been very hard to fulfil these statement due to different aspects – among others the lack of key-actors to carry the message and unresolved economic aspects has played an important role.

In relation to the aspect of embeddedness of the systems it is clear that the more formalized, politically prioritised and economically supported systems, the more embedded systems, in terms of how many children use them and how developed the structures are around the food (canteen facilities, coordinated with learning activities etc.).

In relation to the aspect of embeddedness of the systems it is clear that the more formalized, politically prioritised and economically supported systems, the more embedded systems, in terms of how many children use them and how developed the structures are around the food (canteen facilities etc.). On the other hand these top-down regulated systems may lose the civil embeddedness (legitimacy) and the parents may feel decoupled from the decisions. In that sense the systems may become socially disembodied. In the less well developed school food systems in Norway and Denmark, the few initiatives that are taken to introduce organic food in schools and school meals in general are suffering from a lack of regulatory embeddedness as well as other types of embeddedness. Structures to support a school food system such as kitchens and canteen facilities and personnel is generally not available, and there is a lack of economical support. On the other hand the involvement of the civil actors may be easier because the systems are yet so immature due to this lack of regulatory embeddedness.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The research project iPOPY has analysed the policy processes of the organic school food systems in the four countries Italy, Finland, Norway and Denmark. Here we have presented some of these findings related to an analysis of deeper or weaker embeddedness. The overall conclusions on this study is that organic food have a huge potential in school meals but it is challenged by: “double-embedding” processes in Denmark and Norway; “single-embedding” processes in Italy and by scattered embedding processes in Finland.

It is clear from the studies in this part of the iPOPY project that the complexity of school food systems, where different countries have various approaches, and many actors are involved, that a fruitful discussion to address obesity and health problems among children should build on some analytical understanding of the many different aspects and cultural meanings of a given area, in this case the school meals.

On this basis our study we have derived some tentative recommendations. These vary from more general to more concrete and they will be further qualified in the final publication of the findings in the iPOPY project.

- a. Embedding organic food in public school meals is not done by a simple product replacement. It is necessary to address also legal issues, price premium issues, structural issues, sourcing issues, social issues, etc
- b. Taking the development of the “whole school approach” and the curricula of the schools into consideration for embedding organic food in these approaches which strives for coherence of the school's policies and practices
- c. Successful embedding of organic food has to be careful synchronised with other agendas on the local, municipal, (provincial), regional and state level, and also European conditions and policies must be taken into consideration.
- d. Establishing a transition process tailored the relevant social actor networks is crucial to a successful embedding process. For example high level decision makers can facilitate the process by eliminating barriers (economic, formal, legal, bureaucratic etc).
- e. Involving the most relevant user groups in the schools (pupils, parents, school personnel, municipal administrative staff) at relevant stages of the development and operation of organic school meal schemes have a positive and proactive effect on the embedding of organic food in school meals. Engaging for example parent groups can establish a very important local ownership. Also the teachers commitment can be activated through careful coordination with home economics and many other classes/teachers.
- f. Systematic regulatory efforts can be very helpful as shown in Italy. The assessment of the implementation should also be carefully planned into this effort, using relevant constructive instruments to support the progress of implementation and the building of commitment.
- g. School external agendas can be supportive to include in the embedding task. For example can close cooperation or partnerships with local organic producers support both cultural, social and other inclusive embeddings.

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