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School food supply in Lower Saxony - Analysis of the current situation

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Abstract

For some years now the number of all-day schools providing school meals in the federal state of Lower Saxony, Germany, has increased continuously.

This paper aims at analysing the political determinants and the organization of the provision of school meals in Lower Saxony with a special focus on the provision of organic food and sustainability.

As to methods, literature was researched and internet sources were evaluated. In addition, interviews with experts in the field contributed to the findings.

The results show heterogeneous approaches to and different forms of the organization of school meal supply. School boards, as the chief agents of provision, seem to enjoy a high degree of organizational freedom. Due to small budgets, time constraints and lack of experience, the quality of the meals provided may suffer and the range of organic products may be affected. It often results in pragmatic solutions dictated by cost saving.

With respect to the invitation to tenders, existing quality standards have not been made legally binding for commercial food suppliers to date. Neither is the quality of school meals of particular significance for school inspections.

Stakeholders of school meal provision receive support from the Consumer Council of Lower Saxony (Verbraucherzentrale Niedersachsen) and the Coordination Centre for School Food of Lower Saxony (Vernetzungsstelle Schulverpflegung Niedersachsen). The latter opened in spring 2009. A series of workshops within the public campaign "Anyone can go organic" (Bio kann jeder) run by the Hanover Centre of Environment (Umweltzentrum Hannover) provides advice and/or initial training to schools and school boards concerning the use of organic food.

Keywords: iPOPY, school meals, organic, Germany, Lower Saxony, policy, quality standards

SCHOOL FOOD SUPPLY IN LOWER SAXONY ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT SITUATION



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Introduction / Problem

The state of Lower Saxony is in the north of Germany and has about eight million inhabitants. The capital of the state is the city of Hanover. For a couple of years the number of all-day schools in Lower Saxony providing school meals has increased continuously. The present paper aims at analysing the political determinants and the organisation of the provision of school meals in Lower Saxony with a strong view to the provision of organic food and sustainability.

Materials and Methods

Research encompassed literature and internet sources which were evaluated. In addition, interviews with experts in the field contributed to the findings. Research took place from June to August 2009. The methods take the IPOPY project into consideration.

Results (Part 1 of 2)

According to state law, responsibility of providing and funding school meals is incumbent upon school boards (districts, city and/or regional councils) which dispose of these issues with a high degree of organisational freedom (see Fig. 1).

Heterogeneous conditions at the schools, lack of experience, time constraints and short budgets often result in pragmatic solutions dictated by cost saving i.e. in basic provision. This apparently has detrimental effects on the quality of the school meals in general and organic food in particular.

Though quality standards for school meals were set up in 2007, they have not been made legally binding. (see Fig. 2)

Invitations to tenders are defined by the price and are not bound to quality criteria by law.

Results (Part 2 of 2)



Fig. 1: Organizational freedom of school boards

Furthermore Lower Saxony has not set up specific regulations for the provision of a minimum amount of organic food in relation to overall supply of school meals. It must also be taken into account that the level of acceptance of school meal among pupils is still low. Breakeven has not been reached yet and school boards subsidize school meals.



Fig. 2: Levels of school meal provision

Higher costs for organic food pose an even bigger problem. Organizers of school meal provision receive support by the Consumer Council of Lower Saxony (Verbraucherzentrale Niedersachsen) and the Coordination Centre for School Food of Lower Saxony (Vernetzungsstelle Schulpflegung Niedersachsen). The workshops of the national campaign "Anyone can go organic" (Bio kann jeder) in Lower Saxony are run by the Centre for Environment in Hanover (Umweltzentrum Hannover). This provides advice to schools and school boards on the introduction of organic food.

Conclusions

Strong signals from political decision-makers are required to introduce the provision of highly qualitative organic school meals in Lower Saxony. Counselling networks pooling their respective competences may have a positive effect on the introduction of organic school meals and may give general assistance to school boards. Schools which have successfully integrated organic food into their school meal can share their knowledge and experience with other schools on Internet fora. Last but not least, organic food suppliers can take active steps towards promoting their goods to school boards and making attractive offers.

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