

## Policy goals regarding the organic sector in Finland

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**Key words:** food policy; policy document analysis; policy impact; barriers and drivers; implementation

### Abstract

*A number of relevant national policy documents were examined in order to clarify justification and proposed measures in support of organic food and their linkage to sustainability. The implementation of the goals is discussed by considering them in relation to the actual use of organic food within the municipal catering.*

*With the public catering sector as the path breaker the aim is to increase the use of organic food. However, its use in professional kitchens has increased slowly. In addition to price constraints availability and delivery problems are accentuated in sparsely populated Finland.*

*Organic food is a value choice, and the municipal authorities are in key position. Organic option should be included into the municipal development strategies. Attention needs to be paid to the research results dealing with environmental and human wellbeing interpreted in own situation. It is important to involve local actors in developing the food sector by appreciating the caterers' expertise and the customers' experiences.*

### Introduction

The strategic goals of the Finnish food policy are to develop agriculture and food production as a sector of strong expansion both for domestic markets and for export, to improve sustainability of the food sector and to harness the public catering sector as the path-breaker in sustainable food consumption (Food Strategy 2010, VN 2010, 2011).

Regarding sustainability, organic production provides a clear alternative, the production of which is controlled so as to secure the environmental and human health and animal welfare. Today organic production in Finland comprises about 8% of the cultivated area and about 1.3% from the food purchases both within the public and private sector (MMM 2012). Encouraged by country brand working group visioning organic production to contribute at least 50% to the Finnish food sector by the year 2030 (Country Brand Delegation 2010) marked growth is expected in the coming years.

The aim of this policy impact study is to scrutinize the Finnish food policy goals regarding the organic sector, and their linkage to the sustainability strivings as articulated in the policy discourse. In concluding section the impact of the policy goals is discussed by considering their implementation in praxis with the focus on the statutory municipal catering sector.

### Material and methods

The study is based on a scrutiny of about 20 national policy documents from the past decennium relevant in view of sustainability, food and organic sector. The method was that of the qualitative content analysis using the sustainable food<sup>2</sup> as the conceptual frame in the analysis. The documents were scrutinized in order to look for the quotations dealing with organic food, its production and consumption. The quotations were identified as dealing with problems, justification, aims, measures, and impacts, and coded accordingly. The quotations were further sorted so as to refer to different actor groups, farmers, SME:s, public catering sector and consumers. Attention was specifically paid to the quotations dealing with the public catering sector.

### Results

The overall food policy goal is to expand the use of organic food (Food Strategy 2010, VN 2010, 2011). This is done by diversifying and increasing organic production so as to meet the demand, by developing the organic food chain and by improving the degree of upgrading of organic food. The domesticity is stressed both in supply and in use of organic products (Food Strategy 2010, VN 2010, 2011, Ministry of the Environment 2012).

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<sup>2</sup> 1 SusFood (2012). Sustainable food production and consumption. EU 7th framework program. <http://www.susfood-era.eu/index.php?index=30>.

The institutional kitchens of the public sector are obliged to act as good examples in environmentally responsible food purchases and in increasing the use of local and organic food (SRE 2008, Ministry of the Environment 2009, 2012, MMM 2012). Organic food is justified as one means to promote overall sustainability within the public sector (Ministry of the Environment 2009, 2012). Often the justification refers also to local food rather than strictly to organic food (e.g. VN 2009). This is because it is recognized that assessing sustainability of food products is not unambiguous<sup>3</sup>, and local, organic, seasonal and vegetarian are presented as options to promote sustainability (Ministry of the Environment 2009, 2012).

It is noted that organic production does not solve the global problems of food availability, but the natural circumstances and physical resources in Finland provide good opportunities to promote organic production as a response to consumer demand (SRE 2008). The role of the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in improving the status of the Finnish organic food products is acknowledged (SRE 2008, Food Strategy 2010, VN 2010, 2011).

Factors hampering the use of organic food (as well as local food) and making the responsible choices unduly difficult within the public catering sector deal with the strategic decision-making, lack of knowledge on purchasing procedure, lack of education among the municipal procurers and with the underdeveloped purchasing process focusing only on price (VN 2010). The most severe practical problems regarding use of organic (and local) food are the uneven availability and low degree of processing of the products as well as the impact on the purchasing costs (Ministry of the Environment 2009, VN 2009). In addition, the co-operation along the organic food chain is not satisfactory, and the field is fragmentary (SRE 2008, VN 2010).

The measures aim at settling the legislative, informative and practical hindrances in use of organic food and at securing decent resources both for food purchasing and for the actors' education (SRE 2008, VN 2010). Communication campaigns, certification schemes and clear criteria for sustainable food procurements are offered as means to improve actors' awareness on environmental and health impacts of food. The need to clarify procurement law by providing instructions regarding promotion of seasonal, vegetarian and organic food is acknowledged. Instructions are needed also in putting out tender calls with request for traceability, freshness and nutritional quality (Ministry of the Environment 2009, 2012). Improved purchasing know-how within public catering sector and inclusion of qualitative criteria in competitive tendering as well as legislative procedures are also seen to strengthen the competitive power of the SME:s. The implementation of the measures requires actions both from the organic sector itself and from the government (VN 2011).

The aims expressed in several of the policy documents have been brought together and concretised in the strategy for developing organic food markets in Finland. The overall goal is to consolidate Finnish organic food products in domestic retail and catering sectors as well as in export. The basis for development is customer orientation, efficient collaboration, learning and innovation and clear profile. R&D of organic sector is encouraged for new innovations and in order to upgrade organic production and to streamline supply and demand. The concrete aims by the year 2015 were specified as follows: the share of organic products is 6% from domestic food retail and 10% from food exports, all public institutional kitchens use organic products, and in private catering sectors there is a yearly increase of 15% in use of organic products. Further, organic food is a natural part of the food sector's communication (Organic strategy work group 2006, Kottila 2011).

In support of the food policy aims to turn the share of organic food into a strong upsurge (VN 2011), the government prepares a promotion program for the organic sector for the years 2012-2020 (MMM 2012). The program emphasizes the role of organic animal husbandry and that of public procurements, in which the use of organic products is to be expanded so as to cover all kitchens within the public sector. The need for improved efficiency in processing, marketing and export of the Finnish organic food items and niche products is stressed. The concrete aims by the year 2020 are defined in line with those of the sustainable consumption and production: an overall three-fold increase in sales of domestic organic food products both in retail and within public catering sector. This means the share of 20% from cultivated area as well as from food served in schools and in day care centres, and the share of 10% for organic products from the Finnish food export (Ministry of the Environment 2012).

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<sup>3</sup> Sustainable meal service has been defined as "a product of shortest possible supply chain or an organic product or a product that has been produced traceably in line with the responsibility principles" (Ministry of the Environment 2009).

## Discussion

In the analysed national policy documents there are three clearly articulated aims related to organic food: increased use of organic food with the public catering sector as the path breaker, improved sustainability of the food sector and marked expansion of the organic food sector (Kottila 2011, Ministry of the Environment 2009, 2012, MMM 2012, SRE 2008, VN 2006a,b, 2007, VN 2009, 2010 2011).

Organic food has, however, not really found its way into the institutional kitchens, and expanding its use in professional kitchens has proved to be a very slow process. Even though the *Steps to Organic* -training program<sup>4</sup> has been running now for 12 years and it is well known among the caterers (Muukka et al. 2009), the use of organic products in public kitchens is still modest. With the share of the order of 1%, it is about the same as that in retail (MMM 2012).

Appreciating the growing interest in organic food abroad, the growth of the organic sector is sought especially from the exports. In general, the domesticity of organic food is not an issue; only the most recent documents stress the domesticity of organic food supplies both in retail and public catering (Ministry of the Environment 2012, MMM 2012). However, stressing domesticity does not necessarily help the Finnish organic sector, because the appreciation of domestic conventional food as pure, safe and tasty has slowed down the demand of explicitly organic products (SRE 2008). This effect may be accentuated by the fact that in the policy documents, local and organic are often used in parallel, and sustainability is given as an overall justification for both organic and local food (e.g. Ministry of the Environment 2009).

Over the past decade, several factors hampering the use of organic products have been repeatedly pointed out in the policy documents. In institutional kitchens the problems crystallise into the availability of organic products suitable for the needs of the professional kitchens and into their higher price compared to conventional products, both problems being accentuated with animal based products (Muukka et al. 2009).

The policy relies on the top-down approach, the implementation of which is at the responsibility of the municipalities. In praxis, the municipalities are constrained by the EU regulations regarding competitive bidding of the public purchases and by the economic resources allocated in the budget for the catering sector. Because of the municipalities' tight economic situation the focus has long been on the price-based competition. The EU regulations, however, also offer the possibility to stress quality aspects and to require organic food (EC 2011). A conscious strategy to develop the public catering sector and a firm knowledge on purchasing procedures is needed to accommodate these requirements within the "combined affordability" in the tender calls.

In concluding, there are several reasons for the slowish growth of the organic sector in Finland. There is laxity in the policy aims, and the practical obstacles have not been addressed in the real-life context of the municipalities. Within the frame of the regulations regarding competitive bidding it is fully possible to require organic products, but it is useless to do so, if the bottlenecks have not been identified and opened. The same approach cannot be offered as an overall solution for all municipalities, but the problems need to be addressed in the concrete situations and regarding the concrete products. Par excellence, organic food is a value choice, and it requires determined political will among the municipal authorities. The loose policy articulation leaves enough play room for the municipalities to outline own food strategies based the best available knowledge. It is important to pay attention to the research results dealing with environmental and human wellbeing and to interpret these in terms of own situation. The outcome of the strategy will be enhanced, if the practical actors are involved in strategy planning (Mickwitz et al. 2009). With the actor-oriented approach attention is paid both to the views and experiences of the catering professionals and to the needs of their customers. So far, such municipal food strategies are rare, but the available evidence shows that change is possible (e.g. Kakriainen and von Essen 2005). It is therefore, suggested that adoption of organic food could be characterized by polycentrism at local level instead of collective top-down action. The pilot municipalities can learn from each others' experiences and innovations; sharing this knowledge can eventually influence also the national food policy

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<sup>4</sup> The Steps to Organic -training program is a voluntary program aimed at helping professional kitchens to increase their use of organic products as means to support sustainable development within the catering sector. <http://www.portaatluomuun.fi>

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