

# Policy Brief

## Free School Meals Sourced from Small-Scale Farmers: a Win-Win Approach for Food Systems Transformation

Child poverty is on the rise in the European Union (EU). In 2021, 1 in 4 children was at risk of poverty or social exclusion<sup>1</sup>, with a total of 19.8 million children across the EU (2021) encountering barriers to doing well in school and enjoying good health. This situation has long term consequences: these children face a higher risk of becoming unemployed, poor and socially excluded as adults.<sup>1</sup>

Free school meals are a strategic lever to implement the right to food and nutrition in the EU, by ensuring all children have access to healthy and nutritious food, daily. Free school meals can also support the transition to sustainable food systems by linking school meals to small-scale farmers using organic or agroecological production methods. Finally, purchasing school meals from small and medium scale farmers is a lever for social justice as it provides a steady source of income to those who work the land in our territories. This policy brief advances four policy recommendations to the EU and its Member States on how to use free school meals as a tool to implement the right to food and nutrition in the EU, and foster a transition to sustainable food systems.

### Policy Recommendations

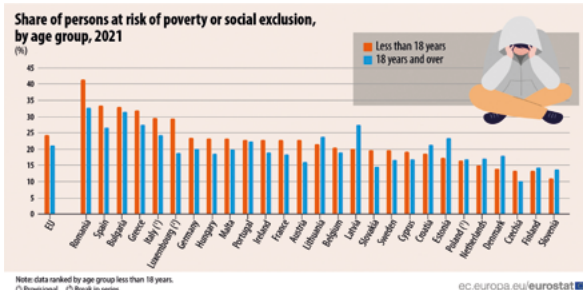
**EU Member States should provide free, healthy and sustainable school meals to every child.**

Access to free school meals means that every student, in every school, can receive the same meal free of charge, regardless of their family income or background. This is an important public policy initiative for advancing equity in school nutrition, tackling food poverty in the EU, and supporting the right to education.

Why should the EU guarantee free, healthy and sustainable school meals?

EU Member States, as signatories to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) are responsible for the implementation of the human right to food and nutrition. Further, EU activities should aim to eliminate inequalities and combat discrimination, promote adequate social protection, fight against social exclusion, promote high levels of education and employment, and protect human health and the environment (Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, articles 8 to 13)<sup>2</sup>. The EU has demonstrated through its past policy initiatives<sup>3</sup> its political will to prioritise children by highlighting the need to tackle child poverty transversely through different sets of policies. Income-based school meals initiatives are already in place in many European countries, but current eligibility criteria don't capture all those on lower incomes. The recent increase in

food prices is only making it harder for millions of lower-income households to provide healthy meals for their children. The EU can do more by mainstreaming free school meals and using school canteens to effectively tackle and break the intergenerational cycle of child poverty.



Indeed, there are over 80 million<sup>4</sup> children in the EU and food at school can make up more than 50% of their daily intake. Free school meals also have a huge potential to tackle unhealthy nutrition patterns and alarming child obesity rates. According to WHO (World Health Organisation), 1 in 3 European school-aged children is overweight or obese, which has long term impacts on our public health system.

What are additional benefits of providing free, healthy, and sustainable school meals to every child?

- promote healthy and nutritious eating habits early in life, prevent obesity and malnutrition in children and thereby alleviate future pressures on the public health system;

### Policy Highlights

Provide free, healthy and sustainable school meals to every child, in order to guarantee the human right to food and nutrition in the EU.

Establish mandatory criteria within public food procurement for school meals to include a minimum percentage of food from organic and agroecological systems.

Organise a public food procurement process that is more accessible to and actively supports small-scale farmers.

Ensure and monitor that all children have access to healthy and sustainable school meals.

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- re-distribute women's unpaid care work and non-productive labour activities that are crucial for human life and reproduction;
- generate public jobs guaranteeing a decent work environment for all workers involved in the school meal process;
- empower school and education communities by guaranteeing moments of informal exchange around food;
- end the social stigma attached to income-based food initiatives;
- support a coherent and coordinated policy response to the food and environmental crisis;
- foster the effective and integral operationalisation of different EU initiatives including the Farm to Fork Strategy, the European Child Guarantee, and European Pillar Social Action Plan.

### ESTONIA, CROATIA AND SWEDEN

Some countries already offer free meals to every child aged 7-16 and to most students aged 16-19. In Estonia, 1 euro a day per student, spent by the state, guarantees a free meal a day to all children attending school.<sup>5</sup> Successes related to school feeding in Estonia, and its recent 'Farm to School' project include a guaranteed 20% of organic foods in school meals in the Võru County. The national and local funding covers almost 100% of school lunch expenses, and some municipalities have begun to provide breakfast and afternoon snacks for children living in low-income households.

Croatia recently decided to allocate 73 million euros to fund free school meals for all its students. In Sweden, access to free school meals also seeks to reduce impact on the environment; reduce food waste; improve child health and prevent diseases as part of public health work.<sup>6</sup>

### What should the EU and its Member States do?

- Develop an ambitious legislative framework for sustainable food systems (FSFS) that is grounded in the right to food and promotes policy coherence at EU level. Public procurement initiatives should be oriented to provide free school meals sourced from small-scale farmers.

- Make free, sustainable and healthy school meals part of the mainstreaming checklist foreseen by the EU Strategy on the rights of the child.
- Dedicate public funding to ensure every child has a free, sustainable and healthy meal every school day. The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) can serve this purpose, in line with their scope and mandate.

**The EU should establish mandatory criteria within public food procurement. School meals should include a minimum percentage of organic and agroecologically produced food to support the transition to territorial and resilient food systems.**

Supporting organic and agroecological food production, as well small, dynamic and territorialised farms is critical for sustainability. It is also key to ensure access to fresh, nutritious, and healthy food locally. To guarantee decent farmers' income and sustainable production, price competition cannot be the main criterion.

### Why should school meals include a minimum percentage of food coming from organic and agroecological farms?

Industrial food systems count among the major drivers of soil pollution, climate change (through excessive greenhouse gas emissions), biodiversity loss, and excessive freshwater consumption. Intensive agricultural practices are transgressing planetary boundaries, which in the medium term, will compromise European food production capacity itself.<sup>7</sup> According to the Ten Years For Agroecology (TYFA) scenario,<sup>8</sup> it is possible to transition to sustainable farming systems (without the use of pesticides and synthetic fertilisers) and change food consumption (more vegetables and legumes). This would imply moving away from industrial and factory-farm products, and re-territorialising EU livestock production.<sup>9</sup> This would reduce the greenhouse gas emissions of the agricultural sector by 40% and contribute to restoring biodiversity and water quality.

Through public procurement, public authorities can concretely support small-scale farmers who are already using organic or agroecological methods, and encourage others to adopt more sustainable practices. This would require mandatory criteria (such as agroecological or organic production) to be included in the tender contract, as suggested in the ICLEI Manifesto for establishing minimum standards for public canteens across the EU.<sup>10</sup>

### What EU Member States should do:

- Establish criteria and guidelines on nutritious food such as the 'health oriented nutrient profile model' (FAO);
- Establish minimum criteria on seasonality and freshness;
- Establish minimum criteria on nutritious foods to encourage the intake of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, pulses, seeds, berries and dairy/meat products coming only from peasant animal farming, and maximum criteria to limit the consumption of processed food and industrial meat products;

- Require that school meals contain a minimum of 20% from organic food production and/or agroecology, in which case evidence-based certification or participatory guarantee systems should be encouraged;<sup>11</sup>
- Require that at least 10% of the food is sourced from small-scale farmers – defined by turnover, agricultural area and number of employees – and/or from peasants – as defined in Art. 1 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP). Indeed, several medium-scale farmers can also be considered ‘peasant’ and public procurement is well-placed to support them.
- Require that school meals are free from GMOs in compliance with current EU legislation;
- Establish minimum criteria on animal welfare such as no cage, no mutilation, slow growing breeds, access to pasture, and reduced transportation between farm and slaughterhouses.<sup>12</sup>

**EU Member States including local and regional governments should organise a public food procurement process that is more accessible to and actively supports small-scale farmers to supply their regional products at fair prices.**

Why should public food procurement support small-scale farmers?

The latest Eurostat census on EU agriculture (2020) shows the number of farms in the EU has declined by 25% in the last 10 years, leading to an increase in the average size of the remaining farms.<sup>13</sup> The population engaged in farming is ageing. Only 1% of EU farm managers are below 25 years old. Without a massive generational renewal, this trend will continue, leading to an intensification of agricultural patterns and soil artificialisation. In such conditions, it will be impossible to maintain sustainable, dynamic, territorially embedded farms that are crucial for sustainable food production. It is therefore essential that public food procurement be used as a tool to support small-scale farmers.

Unfortunately, smallholders currently face many barriers when applying for a public tender, including: complex and burdensome tender procedures, over-emphasis on price as the awarding criterion, onerous participation requirements, supply capacity, lack of information on tender opportunities and long payment periods.<sup>14</sup> This disincentivises small-scale farmers to bid for contracts.

What EU Member States should do:

- Conduct market engagement and multi-actor dialogues to increase transparency, skills, capacity building and accessibility for small-scale farmers;
- Support dynamic procurement and pre-procurement engagement, to involve small-scale farmers and assess their needs (training, logistics, etc.);
- Establish minimum mandatory criteria for public canteens around farm size, such as requiring that at least 10% of food is sourced from small-scale farmers; the contracting authority should clearly include small-scale producers in procurement contracts, to avoid favouring industrial farming;

- Support schools to develop the required infrastructure, a kitchen and relevant equipment, as well as a place for the children to eat, and fund pilot projects to test it out;
- Provide training to workers and cooks in school canteens on how to manage and cook fresh and non-processed products from short chains;
- Support the setting-up of new farms and strengthen generation renewal in the territory by protecting agricultural lands and ensuring fair access to land for young and female farmers, including through the use of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) subsidies. Municipalities can play a key role here, and the Local Procurement team can help coordinate with other municipality services;
- Foster good coordination to strengthen good economic partnership and encourage small catering companies to buy more from small farmers.

**EU member states should ensure and monitor that all children have free and universal access to healthy and sustainable school meals, and help schools and relevant actors comply with public procurement criteria.**

On the assumption public procurement in schools will be financed by public authorities, further guidance and monitoring is needed to identify challenges and evaluate compliance with procurement criteria.

Why do we need guidance and monitoring?

Schools across the EU vary in size, location, and infrastructure. While some schools already have a kitchen and room for children to have lunch, or space to build them, others lack this. It is key to provide guidance, and help schools find adequate solutions while developing monitoring and accompanying processes. Further, it is essential to regularly monitor if the allocated budget is sufficient to achieve the double goal of ensuring all children eat healthy and sustainable food whilst paying fair prices to the small farmers producing it. Making information accessible to the consumers, including around prices and farming practices, will make us all more aware of the role food plays for children’s health, and of its impact on food producers and the environment.

EU Member States should allocate national and/or EU funds to:

- Establish a Review Committee<sup>10</sup> to develop a monitoring process on the ‘percentage of children receiving universal free healthy and sustainable school meals’;
- Finance monitoring processes; and
- Establish a budget for necessary improvements to school catering facilities.

EU Member States should support the Review Committee:

- To interact through participatory processes with the contracting authority, cooks, parents, food producers, and school administration;
- By providing tools to support the schools and actors involved in public procurement to comply with the set criteria and obligations;

- By reporting to the Commission via the European Semester on the progress made as part of the existing reporting addressing child poverty and exclusion;
- By providing schools with tools to collect and publish information in a harmonised way on a) food origin, b) organically or conventionally grown, and c) food prices disaggregated by types of food; schools should be encouraged to make information on school meals publicly accessible through school canteen menus, in the area where the food is consumed and in an annual report available for the Review Committee for their monitoring and also for students and parents.

### THE ORIGIN OF FOOD AND PRICES IN FRANCE

In France, every catering service in charge of public procurement should report information on the origin of food, type of food and its costs. A concrete example of a public food procurement catering analysed in the COACH project shows information on the percentage of food provided from local versus non-local places, food labels or certificates and prices. This information is disaggregated per month and allows an overview on the compliance with criteria or objectives established and an evaluation of what needs improvement until the end of the year.

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- 2 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:12012E/TXT:en:PDF>
- 3 European Child Guarantee. Report from EuroChild: <https://eurochild.org/uploads/2022/12/Invisible-children-Eurochild-2022-report-on-children-in-need-across-Europe.pdf>
- 4 <https://data.unicef.org/how-many/how-many-children-under-18-are-there-in-the-eu>
- 5 [https://gcnf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Estonia\\_2021\\_Final.pdf](https://gcnf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Estonia_2021_Final.pdf)
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The implications of re-territorialising EU livestock production can be found on page 31 of that report, which lays out demands for the territorial reorganisation of livestock farming.
- 10 'Manifesto for establishing minimum standards for public canteens across the EU - ICLEI': [https://iclei-europe.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Our\\_Work/Topics/Food/BuyBetterFood/Manifesto\\_for\\_establishing\\_Minimum\\_Standards\\_for\\_Public\\_Canteens\\_across\\_the\\_EU\\_final.pdf](https://iclei-europe.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Our_Work/Topics/Food/BuyBetterFood/Manifesto_for_establishing_Minimum_Standards_for_Public_Canteens_across_the_EU_final.pdf)
- 11 Agroecology is defined by the FAO in its document '10 Elements of Agroecology' <https://www.fao.org/agroecology/overview/overview10elements/en/> and the '13 Agroecological Principles' <https://www.agroecology-europe.org/the-13-principles-of-agroecology>
- 12 According to the ICLEI Manifesto for establishing minimum standards for public canteens across the EU (see 10 above), 100% of shell eggs and at least 50% of liquid eggs should be certified organic. This could involve progressive change, such as moving toward 'less and better animal' source food with a higher plant-based food content.
- 13 [https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-01/SWD\\_2023\\_4\\_1\\_EN\\_document\\_travail\\_service\\_part1\\_v2.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-01/SWD_2023_4_1_EN_document_travail_service_part1_v2.pdf)
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**COACH** is an EU funded project which aims to facilitate collaboration between farmers, consumers, local governments and other actors to scale up short agri-food chains which rebalance farmers' position, create win-wins for producers and consumers and drive innovation in territorial food systems. <https://coachproject.eu>

**URGENCI** is the international grassroots network of all forms of regional and Local Solidarity-based Partnerships for Agroecology (LSPAs), of which Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is the best-known iteration. URGENCI brings together small-scale food producers, consumers, activists and researchers. <https://urgenci.net>

**FIAN International** is a human rights organisation committed to the struggle of grassroots social movements around the globe to defend and protect the Right to Food and Nutrition and induce a paradigm shift sustained by food sovereignty principles. <https://www.fian.org>

**FIAN Austria** is a national section of FIAN International.

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