



Catering for sustainability: the school meal revolution in Italy and the UK


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Introduction

- Moral panic around food, health and obesity
 - **USA:** 9 million children over the age of 6 are obese
 - **ENGLAND:** in 2003, 28% of children aged between 2 and 10 were overweight or obese
 - **ITALY:** 36% of 9-year-olds are overweight or obese
- Throughout Europe, the institution of school meals has been propelled into the forefront of the debate around health, food and well being

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- Sustainable school meal systems can:
 - reduce diet-related health problems
 - empower consumers
 - create new markets for quality food
 - provide environmental benefits



- What are the opportunities for (and the obstacles to) the development of sustainable school meal systems?
- The UK and Italy as contrasting examples of food choice and public procurement



The UK traditional model

- Deterioration of the quality of food served in schools during the 1980s and 1990s linked to the de-regulation of the system:
 - 1980 Education Act abolished nutritional standards
 - 1988 Local Government Act introduced Compulsive Competitive Tendering – a contracting philosophy that extolled cost over quality and price over value



- A generalized obsession with cost-effectiveness and “value for money” in the UK resulted in:
 - Lower quality school food (40 pence, or 75 cents spent per child)
 - Loss of kitchen infrastructure in schools
 - Reduction in the numbers and skill levels of catering staff



- A school meal revolution is currently under way in the UK, triggered by:
 - Growing concern over obesity
 - Escalating costs of diet-related diseases (costs of obesity in Britain: £ 3.7 billion, or \$ 6.4 billion, a year)
 - Sustainability agenda
 - Jamie Oliver's "Feed me Better" campaign



- The revolution started in Scotland with the “Hungry for Success” strategy (2002)

- Radical reform in England with “Turning the Tables”, (2005):
 - New School Food Trust

 - New budget (£ 280 mil.= \$490 mil.)

- Reform under way in Wales (“Appetite for Life”, 2006)




- Problems and unintended consequences of the reform
 - The demand side is changing faster than the supply side
 - Lack of knowledge and capacity to use the new power at the local level
 - Expected to invest more time in cooking without any improvement in hours, pay and staff numbers, dinner ladies are threatening strike action

- Need for a wider and more integrated “whole school” approach



The Italian model

- Sustainable food procurement has a quite long history in Italy
 - The “Guidelines for a Healthy Italian Diet” (1986), published by the national Institute for Nutrition, explicitly promoted the Mediterranean food model in public catering
 - Finance Law 488 (1999):
“To guarantee the promotion of organic agricultural production of ‘quality’ food products, public institutions that operate school and hospital canteens will provide in the daily diet the use of organic, typical and traditional products as well as those from denominated areas, taking into account the guidelines and other recommendations of the National Institute of Nutrition”


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- Significant development of green and local food procurement in the Italian schools in these last years. In 2003:
 - 68% of Italian schools made at least some use of organic ingredients
 - The number of organic school canteens reached 561
 - Behind the Italian model is a multifunctional view of school meals, which are recognized as an integral part of *people's right to education* and of *consumers' right to health*



- The right to education assigns to school meals the function of educating children to consumption and to local cultural (including food) tradition



- The right to health sets up high standards in relation to the safety and quality of products and services destined to children

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- This multifunctional view of school meals supports creative procurement in 3 ways:
 - 📁 Contracting authorities retain complete control over the service
 - 📄 It allows the possibility of discriminating in favour of local operators
 - 📄 It presupposes a wide interpretation of “best value”



Final reflections

- School meals and the interplay of culture and politics
 - Sustainable school meals can create knowledgeable consumers (Italy)
 - Knowledgeable consumers can create sustainable school meals (UK)
- Sustainable school meal systems require both cultural and political forms of intervention
 - legislation
 - resources
 - organizational capacity (linked to food education)