

Organic school meals: what remains of the pioneer spirit?

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The concept of “organic canteens” has proved remarkably successful, buoyed by the Grenelle de l’Environnement (the French government’s environment round table) and the model of alternative food systems. However, the large-scale implementation of organic canteens remains problematic in the face of incompatibilities between local production and organic farming, and raises the question of the dilution of the initial objective.

It was against the backdrop of a food crisis that organic canteens emerged in the early 2000s in France, in both Paris and the provinces, in particular Brittany and Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur. The aim of these local initiatives is to improve the quality of meals served in schools by introducing organic or certified produce into menus. Some of these initiatives have developed the concept significantly, progressing from occasional operations (“organic days”, organic bread) to meals where the majority of ingredients are organically farmed. For example, it was estimated in 2011 that 1% of collective restaurants (school canteens included) offered completely organic menus every day, and that 11% of them offered one or more organic products every day (Agence Bio 2011).

The roots of organic canteens: quality, education and local farming

Organic canteens, typically set up by people committed to organic food as part of a holistic approach, have similarities with the approaches implemented by *sustainable school catering services*, defined by Morgan and Sonnino (2007) as catering services based on three principles:

- serving fresh, nutritious food;
- viewing food as the result of a negotiation process conducted on a school-wide scale;
- sourcing as much produce as possible locally, respecting seasonal variations.

This definition, taken from in-depth case studies in Europe and the United States, illustrates the expectations and stakes of school catering. These expectations are expressed with varying acuity in countries with different policies and practices, but concerns converge on many points: the nutritional quality of meals (action against obesity), the reappropriation of the food function by the school community (action against dominant economic and industrial rationales), taste education, the development of local farming and support for organic agriculture.

There are therefore multiple issues at stake that are interconnected. The key idea is that the success of these initiatives depends on their appropriation by the various members of the school community: kitchen staff, the authorities responsible for schools, teachers, pupils, parents of pupils, etc. The majority of these initiatives are based on “alternative food networks” that promote

the development of alternatives to standardised industrial solutions.¹ (Murdoch *et al.* 2000; Renting *et al.* 2003).

One of the principal objectives of these first initiatives was the support and promotion of organic farming as a means of production that respects both territories and consumers. However, the arrival of environmental issues on the political agenda is set to institutionalise these pioneering approaches and disseminate them on a wider scale, at the risk of the initial ambitions being lost.

Organic canteens: leverage for nationwide sustainable development

The roll-out of the Grenelle de l'Environnement (the French government's environment round table) in 2007, as a consultation process and regulatory framework (Grenelle 1 and Grenelle 2 laws, 2009 and 2010 respectively), identified the supply of collective restaurants as a possible source of leverage for the implementation of the national environmental policy with regard to farming. As collective catering represents a stable outlet for farmers, the idea is to support and encourage an expansion of the amount of farmland dedicated to organic agriculture, with all that this may bring in terms of positive consequences – for example, in terms of maintaining biodiversity and protecting against the agricultural pollution of water resources. Accordingly, the law has imposed the highest standards on state bodies and local authorities, by requiring collective catering services to ensure that at least 20% of the products they use are from organic sources.

As a result of this injunction, all those involved in public collective catering have sought to put in place organisational structures to enable them to comply to the greatest possible extent with the law. However, the process of switching to organic produce, even for only a small proportion of catering supplies, is a path laden with technical obstacles (in terms of legal requirements, supply structures, equipment, etc.), institutional stumbling blocks (coordination of those involved, organisation of channels) and territorial issues (links between different organisational levels – from local to global – and between local and long-distance relations, consolidation of supply chains, etc.).

In addition, these organic supply requirements are complemented by a second obligation, namely to choose:

“for an identical supply element, seasonal products, products with a low environmental impact, taking into account conditions of production and distribution, products bearing marks identifying quality and origin, or products from farms engaged in a process of environmental certification.” (Grenelle 1 law, 2009, Article 48)

The French law of 27 July 2010 on the modernisation of farming (Article 1) complements the policy laid down in the Grenelle 1 and Grenelle 2 laws by explicitly encouraging public authorities to use “short food-supply chains”, in accordance with the definition of the French ministry for farming and fisheries (2009), such as direct sale processes or supply chains with only one intermediary. It should be noted that this definition does not, however, give any indication of maximum acceptable distances between intermediaries.

The objective is thus threefold: first, to encourage organic farming production; secondly, to support production that is certified (such as “protected designation of origin” status) or in the process of certification; and finally, albeit in veiled terms (so as not to infringe the French public contracts code), to support regional products via the aforementioned seasonal constraint (or, more specifically, to support products that are considered seasonal as long as they are produced in soil – for example, tomatoes produced during the winter months in greenhouses in Spain or the Netherlands are considered to be locally produced).

¹ Such alternatives differ above all in terms of the quality of produce (fresh, the result of small-scale farming that takes account of local soil and climate), the forms of production (more environmentally friendly) and the forms of marketing (giving priority to short food-supply chains) (Ilbery and Maye 2005).

Products that are organic and... local

Ideally, therefore, products served in canteens should be both organic and “local”. Although the argument most usually advanced is that of performance in terms of carbon footprint, this argument is far from proven, as short supply chains for procurement are not necessarily more effective than long-distance supply chains. The argument in favour of the maintenance and development of a healthy form of farming that is firmly rooted in the local environment, on the other hand, appears more sound (Schlich *et al.* 2006).

However, one of the barriers to local procurement lies in the public contracts code, which prohibits any expression of preference for products of a particular national or local origin. The French decree of 25 August 2011 corrected this situation to some extent by making it possible to include certain elements in contract award criteria, such as:

“performance with regard to environmental protection, performance with regard to direct procurement of agricultural produce, performance with regard to the professional development of disadvantaged populations, the total cost of use, profitability, the degree of innovation, after-sales service and technical assistance, and the deadline for delivery or completion.” (Article 53)

Finally, it should not be forgotten that serving “organic canteen” meals is no easy matter, particularly when it involves direct relationships with producers. Managing the extra cost of these meals, identifying stable sources of produce and meeting the constraints of legislation relating to public contracts (i.e. with no national preferences) are all essential ingredients for a successful project. This calls for a readjustment in terms of the preparation tasks required for the products concerned (use of raw products, cooking methods for organic products, etc.) and the way kitchens are organised, particularly in the case of central kitchens that supply several school canteens (separate storage, separation of organic and non-organic preparations).² It is also a question of organising production and processing channels that previously were not specifically oriented towards collective catering, which has very specific requirements (large quantities, regularity, practicality, compliance, etc.).

From organic to local: losing focus of the initial objective?

The fact is that organic farming production in France is, for the moment, insufficiently high to respond to the demand created by the law. For example, Agence Bio (the French agency for the development and promotion of organic formation) has announced that nearly 40% of all organic products consumed in France are imported (Agence Bio 2009). As a result, there has been a shift in both rhetoric and practices from organic production to local production. A recent study conducted among managers of collective restaurants (including school canteens) in the 10th *arrondissement* (district) of Paris showed that actors on the ground were not sufficiently well-informed, despite the fact that the involvement of these actors is crucial (Ait Ahmed Si 2011). The lack of knowledge of the context and aims of the development of organic and/or local procurement, and the information deficit, even ignorance, with regard to organically and locally farmed products that was observed testifies to the lack of interest among these actors, whereas they should be at the heart of the process. A certain resentment can be observed even among the canteen staff, who feel that the use of organic/local food is imposed on them and that, quite rightly, the practices they implement actually encourage imports of organic products rather than local organic farming.

The widespread diffusion of this model,³ laudable in theory, would thus seem to suffer from a simplification of practices and an adoption of stances that are focused on the 20% objective to be

² This is observed in both self-managed school canteens (i.e. managed by the school itself – for example, when the school has its own cook) and outsourced canteens (managed by an external service provider).

³ According to a study conducted jointly by opinion poll firm CSA and Agence Bio (2011), 57% of collective restaurants (including school canteens) served organic products in 2010, compared with 1% in 2000.

attained. The initial direction taken by the pioneers of the movement seems to have been forgotten. As to whether public procurement will act as a tool for the development and maintenance of local agriculture (including organic), this will only become clear in the coming years. Time will also tell whether the policy of organic canteens can contribute to recreating the link initially sought between farming and consumers.

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Further reading:

“Mangez jeunesse” dossier (in French) on school canteens and their economic, environmental and health-related stakes, in the magazine *[Alimentation Générale](#)* (issue 1, March–May 2012).

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