

# **The relocation of school catering systems: building a conceptual framework to analyze local coordination**

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## **Keywords**

school catering / relocation / food systems / public procurement / transaction cost theory

## **Extended abstract**

### Context

While the globalized food system faces social, economic and environmental challenges, a structural change in production and consumption patterns, as well as in distribution channels, towards more sustainable practices is advocated. In this context, school catering is under scrutiny from public policies, researchers, and civil society as it functions as a complete subset of the food system (Retière & Darly, 2023). Indeed, as it provides significant volumes of food to ensure adequate meals for pupils, it encompasses many potentials for the scaling-up of sustainability transformations (Valette and al., 2022). From the quality of food (nutrition and environmental criteria) to waste management, passing by social inclusion, canteens are the place where future generations are educated to food and where consumption practices may evolve (Perignon and al., 2023).

Relocation is conceived as one of the key levers for transforming food systems. In this case, school catering is particularly relevant because of the quantity represented and because of its high degree of spatial fragmentation, offering strong potential for local anchoring. The criteria for food purchasing in public schools could enable changes in the upstream production, processing and logistics - such as valorizing sustainable production, shortening the supply chain and bringing closer producers and consumers (Sonnino, 2009; Swensson and al., 2021).

### Objective

In this communication, we seek to design a theoretical framework to understand how the (re)location of food provisioning contributes to school catering transformation. Our main question is: how is the issue of local food procurement for school catering addressed in the literature? This question calls for others: How is the provision of local food organized? What are the conditions that facilitate local food procurement? What actors are involved in this process? To answer these questions, we conducted a literature review that brought us to emphasize two theories to frame the relocation of food supply: public food procurement and transaction cost theory.

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## Theoretical framework

There is a growing interest in the literature on public procurement. Public procurement policies are considered a means to address societal challenges, referred to as wicked problems, and to promote structural change (Uyarra et al., 2020). Wicked problems are characterized by complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity both for framing and solving them. Tackling such societal problems then requires innovation structures (including new actors, networks, institutions) to understand the context in which their solution must be implemented and to foster transformative change. It calls for strong coordination arrangements between the actors involved in these processes.

The large body of research on public food procurement analyzes food issues as wicked problems (Gaitán-Cremaschi and al., 2022) showing how school catering systems may be reshaped in response to societal challenges. According to Stefani and al. (2017), research on food public procurement is predominantly approached from the perspectives of health and nutrition, focusing on consumers. A second range of analyses are conducted in terms of supply chains and actors, exploring the obstacles and levers they experience in promoting sustainable procurement. Finally, a third category of studies examines the environmental impact of these initiatives, including comparative analyses of the types of products purchased (local/organic) (Tregear et al., 2022) and their carbon footprint (Cerutti et al., 2018), as well as waste management and reduction efforts (Eriksson et al., 2017; Pancino et al., 2021).

In particular, we focus on the second set of studies to examine coordination problems arising from food relocation in the context of school catering. The barriers to local food procurement have already been well-identified in scientific literature, especially for the Global North (Boys & Fraser, 2021; Le Velly & Bréchet, 2011). The cost of products, the lack of knowledge about local offerings leading to mismatches between bids and the capacities of local producers, the existence of alternative market channels for local producers, constraints on increasing the quantity/quality of local supply, food safety regulations, training for collective catering staff, etc. are limitant conditions to the relocation of food provisioning. To overcome these obstacles, multi-level stakeholders' coordination has been pointed out as a key lever (Gaitán-Cremaschi and al., 2022).

To document this issue, we pay attention to the relationship between public buyers and producers, analyzed as a central node in the food catering system (Freguin-Gresh & Angeon, 2022). According to several authors (Gaitán-Cremaschi et al., 2022; Stein et al., 2022; Swensson et al., 2021), public procurement leads to a specific form of transaction that can favor localized and ecological food systems. We then mobilize transaction cost theory to analyze the interaction process between buyers and suppliers in terms of governance and power relationships (Gereffi and al., 2005). This theory assumes that any economic transaction generates costs prior, during and after its completion (research and information cost, bargaining and decision costs, enforcement costs), which leads agents to adopt different institutional arrangements or structures of governance to minimize these costs (Fares & Mamine, 2018).

By combining the literature on public procurement and transaction costs theory, we analyze the specific context of transaction provided by school catering. Public markets specifications (calls

for tender, timeframe) combined with the specific requirements of school catering and the type of goods traded (perishable foodstuffs, health and nutritional standards, "sustainable and quality products" criteria, large volumes, regularity) oblige suppliers and purchasers to coordinate in order to minimize transaction costs (search for information, payment times, trust, etc.). The different types of governance pointed out by the theoretical literature (market, hierarchy and hybrid forms) serve as guidelines to describe how the actors of school catering interact and innovate and to what extent the types of governance they experiment are successful or not to provide schools with local products.

### Empirical perspectives

We designed an analytical framework to grasp the transformations of school catering systems going on with the localization of food purchases. We will discuss how it can be applied to the insular context of La Réunion, a French overseas department, where the question of food relocation is particularly significant given the overall dependence on imports, the rural poverty and the ongoing nutritional transition. In this context, and linked to the French legislation, a set of institutional devices has been deployed at different spatial scales to support local procurement in schools. For example, at the regional scale the CODARUN is a central procurement platform which connects procurers to secondary school catering managers within unified procedures of call for tenders. At the municipal scale, territorial policy tools such as *Projets Alimentaires Territoriaux* push local actors to cooperate and innovate. We will conclude with some methodological perspectives.

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