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Project title and acronym:	innovative Public Organic food Procurement for Youth (iPOPY)
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January 2010: Project progress and summary of results, iPOPY

Organic to the youth

The main focus in the project “iPOPY” (innovative Public organic food Procurement for Youth) is on organic food served in schools and other public arenas for young people. A basic goal is to contribute to an increased consumption of organic food in Europe. About 14 researchers from Denmark, Finland, Italy, Norway and Germany participate in the project group. The iPOPY project collects, systemizes and analyzes information about how school meals and other relevant food systems (e.g. music festival, military camps) are organized, and how organic food is integrated in these systems. Each country has its own history and cultural background, explaining the huge differences in current school meal systems and use of organic products. There is much to learn from other countries, about their challenges and problems but also their good ideas and creative solutions.

Dissemination and project events

Since August 2008, the project group has met twice, mainly for scientific and methodological discussions. As an interdisciplinary project focussing on organic food chains in public settings, we have a restricted access to arenas to present our results. Hence, we have arranged several seminars, presenting iPOPY results along with invited presentations. The large organic trade fair “Biofach” in Nuremberg, Germany was utilised in 2008 and 2009 to arrange a public workshop, which will also take place in 2010. Additionally, we arranged open seminars at the University of Helsinki in January 2009 and at Aalborg University, Ballerup campus (close to Copenhagen) in November 2009. The numbers of participants have been 35-50, and up to 10 countries represented in the audience. From all events, proceedings have been published in the CORE Organic Project Report Series. Additionally we publish reports and papers; all (will be) uploaded to Organic E-prints.

Large variation in school meal systems

Finland and Italy have long traditions for serving warm school meals to their pupils, and Italy is a leader in Europe to serve organic and local products. The Italian state and a number of regional governments have developed policies and routines concerning the provision of organic and locally produced school food. In Finland, economy and lack of interest restrict the use of organic products in the school lunch, but local food is in much focus. Italian meals are subsidized, whereas Finnish meals are free for all families. In Denmark and Norway, children bring a packed lunch and subscribe to milk and fruit served at school. This pattern is slowly changing, and publicly organised food provision is increasing, especially in Denmark. Some Danish municipalities, e.g. Copenhagen have developed large organic school meal programs with ambitious aims of organic food consumption. However, as the food is not free, and food serving activities are usually not well rooted within the school culture, it is a large challenge to attract the interest of the children. Hence, the number of users has so far commonly been below 25 % of the pupils. Norway was the first European country to introduce a daily free school fruit scheme in public schools (in 2007); an initiative which has later spread to the EU level.

Slowly evolving systems, demanding anchorage

School meal systems are rather complex, involving many actors that change over time. Any intervention,

such as the introduction of (organic) school food, has to take into consideration several perspectives including supply and demand as well as economics, policy and the pupil's perceptions and health. Public organic food procurement for youth is commonly linked to political processes, evolving step by step. By comparing different countries and cases, the project will present options to increase the share of organic food in schools and other public arenas for young people. The organic school food systems in eight municipalities, including Rome, Copenhagen and several smaller cities, are studied in detail to reveal such relevant knowledge. The effect of such interventions should be thoroughly evaluated, to make required adjustments and develop a combined learning and steering process. To maintain an organic (school) food system over time, an anchoring is essential. Organic projects tend to vanish when the central driver(s) retire. One way to anchor organic projects is to institutionalise the organic food procurement. Furthermore political support is essential to ensure satisfactory funding. An anchorage will also be formed by utilising the organic school food in the education (staff and users), and by enabling the participation of the pupils in preparing the food.

Supply chains, contracts and certification

The supply of appropriate organic products for school meals and other public procurement is a special challenge due to the still immature production and market. However, the market for organic caterers has a huge potential and hence should be of interest. Decision makers, such as municipal procurement officials should be trained to make specific and ambitious call for tenders demanding organic food.

Communication, cooperation and understanding along the whole food chain are essential to match contractual requirements with available supply chains and the actual possibilities of organic food providers. In Italy, where the consumption of organic products in the school sector is high, contracts for school food have been collected from 100 municipalities in various regions to identify key criteria for appointing a supplier.

A certification of organic school meals will ensure organic quality and increase the visibility of such food, but is demanding and hence little developed. The project analyzes procedures for certification of food-serving outlets, using Germany as a reference. While Denmark has chosen government agencies to carry out organic inspection and certification, Italy, Finland, Norway and Germany have a state-supervised private system. With the exception of Italy all have a national organic label. Currently only Germany has publicly adopted a standard organic certification programme for the out of home sector. Of the countries analysed, Norway has the most similar system, whereas Denmark and Finland offer operators defined categories of organic use. Though Italy leads in organic use in schools there appears to be no national or other verification system in operation.

Look where you are: Food culture varies!

Food culture is an important aspect of school meal systems, and cultural grounds should be considered in any food system intervention. Specific approaches should always be sought, as one size does not fit all. The users (children and parents) and other stakeholders should be involved in participatory decision making processes to evolve ownership for the school meals. One should always be careful not to arouse negative feelings with pupils and parents while pushing for socially desired food and nutritional behaviour.

Educational material about organic food and farming has been collected from all countries and will be analyzed to identify differences among countries. Are there any relations between the degree/success of organic food serving and education about these topics? In Finland, test introduction of some organic food products is studied in primary and secondary level education, interviewing catering staff, teachers and pupils/students. Three different orientations towards education in sustainable development were identified: 1. Devoted; teachers organized both conceptual and practical learning tasks and transformations occurred in the school environment. 2. Aligned with the aims of such education, but put less effort into this particular field. 3. Occupied with other severe problems and hence not able to devote time to this. This illustrates that within the school sector there will be both promoters and opponents to introducing organic food.

Organic and healthy

An introduction of organic school food will benefit from other strategies centred towards increased sustainability, such as school environmental programmes, and vice versa. While introducing or increasing organic school food, one should not just replace non-organic products by organic, but rather re-organise the whole menu. Organic food should be embedded in a broader food and nutrition policy at the school level and preferably also with the whole municipality. Such a policy may be understood as a set of principles that ensures the availability and accessibility of healthy foods and impede the availability of unhealthy food choices. An introduction of organic food is commonly linked to an increased consciousness about healthy food in general, which is an important argument to foster organic consumption.

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