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Empowering consumers: the creative procurement of school meals in Italy and the UK

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> Today is not the era of the big state, but a strategic one: empowering, enabling, putting decision-making in the hands of people, not government.
>
> Tony Blair, Labour's 2005 Party Conference

Introduction

In many European countries something of a 'moral panic' has recently broken out around food, health and obesity. In Italy, roughly 20% of children and teenagers between the age of 6 and 17 years are overweight, and 4% of them are obese (Brescianini *et al.*, 2002). In the UK, where in 1999 19% of the 5-year-olds were overweight and 7% were obese (Mikkelsen *et al.*, 2005, p. 7), the most tangible sign of this growing concern is the Obesity Report (House of Commons, 2004). To address the devastating effects of the 'obesity epidemic' on national health and economy (see Fig. 1), this seminal government report emphasizes the role that public procurement can play by promoting healthy eating habits (House of Commons, 2004, pp. 68–70).

To begin assessing the role of the public realm in supporting sustainable patterns of consumption that privilege 'quality' (i.e. local, seasonal, nutritious and fresh) food, in this paper we focus on school meals, an institution that has been propelled into the forefront of the current debate about health and well-being. Indeed, the school meal service not only constitutes an enormous market in its own right, capable to sustain quality food production systems. If, as Jackson (2004) points out, the school meal system is understood also as a system of social learning, as it should be, it affords the opportunity to promote more enlightened forms of consumer behaviour, particularly the kind of behaviour deemed necessary to make positive food choices in relation to healthy eating (Burke, 2002).

To understand the scope for, and the limits to, the development of school meal systems that *empower* consumers by building their capacity to eat healthily, we compare two very different socio-cultural environments of food choice and public procurement: Italy and the UK. While in Italy the dominant political, regulatory and cultural context explicitly encourages the implementation of pro-active public sector catering policies that prioritize local and organic foods, in the UK the numerous initiatives that are currently seeking to integrate sustainability criteria into food procurement in schools (DEFRA, 2005) still have to confront an uncertain regulatory environment in which local sourcing is perceived to be a risky and possibly illegal activity (Morgan and Sonnino, 2005). As we will show, these divergent national approaches to public food procurement represent different interpretations of a fundamentally ambiguous European macro-regulatory context, which is shaped, at the same time, by an old philosophy of free trade and by emerging ideals of sustainability. Despite their differences, however, both countries show clear signs of commitment to designing a *sustainable school meal service,* which we define as a service that delivers fresh and nutritious food; conceives healthy eating as part of a socially negotiated 'whole school' approach; and, wherever feasible, seeks to source the food as locally and as seasonally as possible. The most important vehicle for securing a sustainable school meals service is *creative procurement policy*, which takes a holistic view of the food chain because it recognizes that production and consumption need to be calibrated at the local level. Through creative procurement, local consumers are encouraged to appreciate the value of health and locally produced food because this is the foundation stone of a sustainable school meals service.

Relocalizing food procurement: the scope for local action in the multilevel polity

Public procurement in Europe is an excellent example of a multilevel governance system, with regulations ranging from the supranational, through the national, to the regional level. At the European Union (EU) level, the regulatory context of public procurement contains an inherent tension between ideals of social and environmental sustainability on the one side and criteria of competitiveness and free trade on the other side. As we described elsewhere (Morgan and Sonnino, 2005), during the 1990s public procurement in Europe was addressed through four sets of directives that aimed to standardize practice across member states and to provide an effective competitive market for public contracts that deliver best value for public money. Underlying these four

FACTS

- *2/3* of the population in England is overweight or obese
- Health problems linked to obesity cost *3.3-3.7 billion pounds* a year

MAIN CAUSES

- Reliance on *convenience foods* due to lack of cooking skills
- Large proportion of *advertising* for highly energy-dense foods
- *Food promotion and pricing* make unhealthy food more attractive
- *Food labelling* is often confusing or absent
- Lack of *physical activity*

SOLUTIONS

- Making people *aware of the dangers* of obesity
- Tighter controls on the *advertising and promotion of foods to children*
- Better standards for *school meals*
- *Reduced salt and energy-density* levels
- Healthy *pricing schemes*
- Improved *organised recreation* in schools and wider society
- Incorporation of *physical activity* into the fabric of everyday life
- Establishment of a strategic framework *for preventing and treating obesity within the NHS*

Source: House of Commons, 2004

Figure 1 The obesity epidemic: facts, causes and solutions.

directives – which targeted public supply contracts (Council Directive 93/36/EEC), public service contracts (Council Directive 92/50/EEC), public works contracts (Council Directive 93/37/EEC) and public utilities contracts (Council Directive 93/38/EEC) – is the principle of 'non-discrimination' – or the idea that public procurement policies in EU member states must not be biased towards domestic business interests.

The principle of 'non-discrimination' presents the biggest problem to the implementation of local procurement initiatives. With public procurement accounting for roughly 14% of the EU's gross domestic product, a major objective is to open up the market in accordance with the EU internal economic policy. As such, the directives made it clear that public procurement must not be explicitly employed to favour businesses in terms of their location. The decision criteria for all contracts to which the four directives applied had to be based on either 'the lowest price' or 'the most economically advantageous tender', a broader category (to be made explicit during the call for tender) that refers to the relationship between price and quality. With regard to costs, the subsequent guidance documents specified that only 'external' costs borne directly by the purchasing authority could be considered in their value calculations. Social and environmental costs such as, for example, 'food miles' – or the distance food travels from source to consumer– could not be used as a selective criterion.

The philosophy of free trade and the single market that underlies the original EU procurement directives began to be openly questioned in the late 1990s, after the stipulation of the Treaty of the European Union in 1997. In fact, article 6 of the Treaty requires the integration of environmental and social objectives into all EU's policies to promote sustainable development. This target called for a radical reform of the EU's legislation on public procurement that culminated in 2004, when the European Parliament endorsed two new directives on public procurement. In addition to social-oriented amendments, these new directives, enshrined into national law in early 2006, establish the principle that award criteria must be 'linked to' the subject matter of the contract. Specifically, article 26 of the Public Sector Directive introduces a revolutionary change in the European macro-regulatory context of public procurement by stating that:

> Contracting authorities may lay down special conditions relating to the performance of a contract . . . The conditions governing the performance of a contract may, in particular, concern social and environmental considerations (European Parliament and Council, 2004).

Complementing the legislative reform, in 1999 the EU Council of Ministers also agreed that contracting authorities can take into consideration the 'production methods' of the bidder, that is, they can choose environmentally friendly products, rather than having to pick the cheapest bid. With regard to food, this agreement is likely to be quite significant, as it will allow public authorities providing meals to schools, hospitals and care homes to privilege healthy, rather than cheap, ingredients.

Even before the reform, however, some European countries found room for manoeuvring within the old EU directives and have successfully moved towards more sustainable food procurement practices. In Sweden, for example, the city of Göteborg

procures a significant amount of local organic food (Morgan and Morley, 2002, p. 33), whereas in Finland the municipality of Pori has adopted the 'acceptance of variants' contractual method (which prescribes that two or more variations of products can be supplied) to enable organic producers to have their environmental qualities considered favourably when they tender for 'conventional' contracts (Morgan and Morley, 2002, p. 37). In Denmark approximately 30% of institutions and 50% of municipalities have been involved in organic catering conversion during the last 10 years (Mikkelsen *et al.*, 2006). Finally, in France, companies such as Flander Artois, Biofinesse and Manger Bio have specialized in supplying local and organic products as well as in assisting public canteens in designing seasonal menus – thereby allowing businesses to keep prices low (Morgan and Morley, 2002, pp. 37–38).

Italy is the country where public procurement strategies establish the clearest priority for local and organic food. As we will show, the key factor behind this trend is not simply an embedded food culture that traditionally attaches a high premium to seasonality and territoriality. The success of the Italian public plate in promoting healthy food habits also depends on the implementation of creative procurement policies that constantly create and recreate the socio-cultural values necessary to foster sustainable food consumption.

Health, education and local identity: the creative procurement of school meals in Italy

Sustainable food procurement has a quite long history in Italy. The earliest experiments go back to the mid-1980s, when, after the establishment of the Commission 'What is Organic' and the issuing of the first national law to regulate the organic sector, the municipality of Cesena designed an organic school meal system. In the following years, other municipalities followed the example of Cesena. In 1989, for example, the city of Padova established the first organic university canteen; in 1990, Udine adopted an organic hospital menu (Morgan and Sonnino, 2005, p. 9).

In addition to introducing organic ingredients in its public canteens, during the 1980s Italy also began constructing a discourse that emphasized the values of the Mediterranean diet. In 1986, eight years after a school in Tradate adopted for the first time a Mediterranean menu, the National Institute for Nutrition published the 'Guidelines for a Healthy Italian Diet', which explicitly promoted the Mediterranean food model in public sector catering (Soil Association, 2003, p. 63). The Italian commitment to the Mediterranean diet became increasingly strong during the 1990s, at the height of the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) crisis. In explicit opposition to the media image of the BSE as something foreign, 'coming from a different country where people do not know how to eat and how to farm' (Sassatelli and Scott, 2001, p. 225), the Mediterranean model came to be considered as an ideal tool 'to move meals away from mass produced, highly processed and invisibly adulterated foods of unknown provenance towards the use of more wholefoods and a greater proportion of certified organic ingredients' (Soil Association, 2003, pp. 63–64).

The link between organic and local food and public catering food policies was made explicit in 1999, when, in response to an increased public concern for healthy eating, the Italian government issued Finance Law 488. Under 'Measures to facilitate the development of employment and of the economy', this law states:

> 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 (cited in Soil Association, 2003, p. 65).

This new legal context had significant impacts on the development of green and local food procurement in the Italian schools. Data show that in 2003, 68% of Italian schools made at least some use of organic ingredients, and even though only 3% offered entirely organic meals, the number of organic school canteens had significantly increased (from 70 in 1997 to 561 in 2003). In the region of Emilia-Romagna, for example, Cesena provides approximately 2400 school and council restaurant organic meals every day; Ferrara sources organically 80% of the ingredients used to prepare meals in its 27 nursery schools; and the small town of Guiglia has gone as far as defining a priority in the tenders for all its public schools and retirement homes to include organic and local food (Compagnoni, 2003, p. 2). Organic catering is well developed also in large Italian cities, with Milan providing 65 000 organic school meals every day and Rome reaching 140 000 mostly organic school meals per day. Other Italian municipalities have emphasized primarily local and traditional food. This is the case, for example, in Fanano, a small town where all schools source their ingredients directly from local producers (Vita Non Profit Online, Redazione, 2003), but also in Ascoli and in Borgo San Lorenzo, where only local products are utilized to prepare school meals. In short, the Italian public sector is actively committed to fostering sustainable consumption practices that privilege and promote organic and local food. Behind this effort, as we will attempt to show, is primarily a *multifunctional* view of school meals that opens up room for implementing creative public procurement strategies.

In Italy, school meals are recognized as an integral part of both people's right to education and of consumers' right to health. Significantly, in an effort to legally contextualize school meals, Italian law professor Ruffolo refers to five different aspects of the country's Constitution that support the right to healthy school meals (Ruffolo, 2001, pp. 104–105). These include:

- the 'fundamental right to health' to which each individual is entitled (article 32);
- citizens' 'inviolable right' to a 'harmonious personal development' (article 2);
- a legal commitment to promote 'cultural and territorial development' (article 9);
- the 'protection of children', both as family members (articles 29–31) and as members of social communities, such as schools (article 33, 34 and 37);
- the 'valorization of local autonomies' and the devolution of decision-making powers (articles 5 and 114).

In short, the Italian model integrates the nutritional dimension of the food served in schools into a wider cultural framework that emphasizes the educational purposes of school meals and assigns to them the specific function of protecting the 'local'. In Ruffolo's (2001, pp. 105–106) words, 'school meals must prove capable to

provide children with a correct food education, compatible with the specific culture of their territory, and to help them develop a sense of taste that contributes to the harmonious development of their individual personality'. Law 281 on the protection of consumers' rights, issued in 1998, reiterates this interrelation between health promotion and cultural development. In fact, on the one hand the law specifies that the right to health includes all aspects related to individual growth and development and sets up high standards in relation to the safety and quality of products and services destined to children. On the other hand, the law also stresses the importance of educating citizens to consumption and to local cultural (including food) traditions.

Significantly, in Italy the educational values attached to the food consumed at school are expected to embrace not just the children, but also their families. Crucial to this end is the role played by the *Commissione Mensa*, or Canteen Commission, which aims to involve the families in the monitoring and evaluation of the quality of the school meal service. On the basis of a national law, each school must appoint its own *Commissione Mensa*, which includes any number of parents, appointed for a period of three years, who can visit the school in groups of two, unannounced, any time during term. Unlike other bodies involved in the monitoring of the system, parents are not allowed to touch the food. However, they can sample it and, with the support of a standardized checklist, they can assess the size of the portions offered to children, the hygienic conditions of the service and the expiration dates of the ingredients utilized to prepare the meals. The checklist is then given to a nutritionist, appointed by the municipality, who is responsible for dealing with any problem parents identify. In Rome, a recent 'quality revolution' (Sonnino and Morgan, 2005) in the school meal system has given new emphasis to the role and tasks of the Canteen Commissions, which are clearly seen as a fundamental tool to empower consumers in and *beyond* the classroom and the school canteen. As stated by the Councillor for Education during an interview:

> A strong relationship with the parents is crucial to create and promote an effective food education policy that spreads from the school canteen to the family. In addition to having a high educational value, children's collective catering can and must represent a qualified and authoritative link with the diet children follow at home. Also with regard to collective catering the school provides a context to promote cultural, healthy and solidarity-based habits that are important for the welfare of the entire community.

With its emphasis on food education, the Italian multifunctional view of school meals supports creative forms of procurement in three crucial ways.

1 It allows contractors to retain complete *control* over the service. Because school meals are seen as part of a much broader educational project supervised by the schools, contractors are entitled to a *ius variandi*, or the right to modify the agreed conditions of the service in case changes are introduced in the school's educational project (article 1661 of the Civil Code) or in case the service does not conform to the educational and cultural parameters identified in the original contract (article 1662 of the Civil Code). In this context, the contractor has the right to monitor the service and also to assess whether or not the object of the contract (the diet) is consistent with the educational project of the school (article 1349). If necessary, the contractor can introduce the changes needed to preserve the link between school meals and the school's educational project.

2 It allows the possibility of *discriminating*. Because school meals are also assigned the educational function of conserving local traditions, the Italian system legitimates the possibility of 'discriminating' in favour of local operators and all expertise linked to local food. As stated by the State Council in 1992 during a public auction case, it is legal for a municipality to restrict the participation in a public competition to companies located in the province, 'given the necessity to take into consideration the taste of local consumers and to guarantee prompt communication and intervention in case of problems' (Cons. Stato, V, 24/11/1992, n. 1375, in *Cons. Stato*, 1992, 1636; cited in Ruffolo, 2001). In other words, through its emphasis on the linkages between food and local culture and traditions, the Italian system opens up a legal way to interpret creatively the EU directives on public procurement and to emphasize the territorial 'rootedness' of the school meal service over and above the European principle of 'non-discrimination'.

3 It presupposes a *holistic* interpretation of the notion of *best value*. Contrary to the UK, where 'best value' with regard to the proposed prices of the meal is evaluated by taking into consideration primarily economic issues, in Italy local authorities are encouraged to assess also the hygienic, nutritional and educational aspects of the proposed service. As Ruffolo (2001, p. 117) explains, 'the economic advantage is not appreciated only on the basis of the criterion of the "lowest price"; the qualitative characteristics of the proposed service with regard to "food culture" and its compatibility with the wider school project must also be taken into consideration'. Indeed, law 488 identifies 'quality' as the most prominent criterion to be adopted to select a catering company and specifies that this must be assessed by considering the relations that the proposed service has with local cultures and traditions. Predictably, in this kind of legal context, the services provided by local suppliers and based on traditional food preparation styles, although more 'expensive', become, overall, more 'advantageous'.

In sum, in Italy school meals are embedded in a food culture that is intimately related to local identity. Under this approach, the meal consumed at school becomes first and foremost an educational tool and it provides a context to actively promote, through creative procurement, the values and meanings attached to food. It is important to emphasize, however, that such values and meanings are not a passively inherited legacy. Quite the contrary, they must be created anew in each generation. Indeed, the efforts made in the Italian school kitchens are integrated by complementary educational initiatives in the classrooms. In 1998, for example, the Ministry of Agriculture implemented an educational programme, called 'Cultura che Nutre' ('Culture that Feeds'), which educates school children to an 'informed and healthy' diet through the implementation of school projects that emphasize the values of seasonality and territoriality in the context of food (Morgan and Sonnino, 2005). In 2005, the Ministry of Agriculture launched another educational programme, called 'Dal Campo al Piatto' ('From the Field to the Plate'), which aims to actively involve children in the various stages of the food chain.

In short, through creative procurement and through the implementation of educational programmes and initiatives, the Italian public sector is actively involved in designing school meal systems

that create knowledgeable consumers willing and able to choose 'quality' food.

From low cost to best value: school meals as a litmus test of creative procurement in the UK

Over the past two decades the UK has witnessed a quiet revolution in the quality of its food, with the rediscovery of local and regional products and a new emphasis on fresh ingredients. This quality revolution has been significant but partial, because it is largely confined to middle class homes and restaurants that specialize in the 'fresh, seasonal and traceable' culinary tradition. Consumers of public sector catering – in schools, hospitals, care homes and the like – have yet to enjoy the benefits of this food revolution, unlike their counterparts in some other EU countries (Peckham and Petts, 2003).

Indeed, so far as the school meals service is concerned, the quality of food has actually *deteriorated* over the past two decades, largely because of deregulation under successive Conservative governments in the 1980s and 1990s. The most damaging forms of deregulation include the 1980 Education Act, which abolished nutritional standards and removed the obligation on local authorities to provide school meals for all pupils except those entitled to free meals, and the 1988 Local Government Act, which introduced Compulsory Competitive Tendering, a contracting philosophy that extolled cost over quality and price over value. Had there been a greater cultural attachment to the quality of food, as there is in Italy, there might have been more opposition to the debasement of school meals; but, in the event, the combination of a cheap food culture and a neoliberal government proved to be a noxious cocktail from a nutritional point of view (Morgan, 2004; Orrey, 2005).

The long-term effect of Compulsory Competitive Tendering was to install a narrow cost-based metric at the core of the catering and procurement policies in the UK that had a number of negative consequences on the system, including: reduced use of fresh and locally produced food; increased use of pre-prepared and processed food; a loss of kitchen infrastructure in schools; and fewer catering staff with reduced skill sets (Unison, 2002; Davies, 2005).

The downward spiral of school food in the UK has finally been checked by a political backlash in very recent years. Behind such backlash are not just factors such as the moral panic surrounding obesity, which has registered at the highest political levels in the UK as we noted earlier, and an increased awareness of the escalating exchequer costs of diet-related diseases (that are estimated to reach some £6 billion per annum).

Perhaps more significantly, there has been a major change in consumer's attitude, mainly related to the burgeoning concerns about food quality, provenance and production methods raised in the UK by perennial food scares (Morgan *et al.*, 2006). Far from being confined to traditional middle class society, this more reflexive attitude has also spread to consumers of public sector catering, especially to schools. Parent groups have sprung up around the country to challenge their local education authorities about the quality of school meals, particularly with respect to the lack of fresh ingredients, the amount of money devoted to the food itself and the general lack of information available to parents and children alike about the school meals service (Morgan and Sonnino, 2005). However, in contrast to Italy, where the *Commissione Mensa* enables parents to have a direct role in monitoring and evaluating the quality of the school meals service, there is no systematic mechanism in the UK to give parents a role in the governance of the service. Having little involvement with the school meals service, and virtually no knowledge of it, some parents, for example, over-reacted to the recent and very successful Jamie Oliver TV series by withdrawing their children from school meals and providing them with a packed lunch instead – an alternative that was sometimes of less nutritional value than the school meal it had replaced.

The era of school meal deregulation in the UK was officially brought to an end in April 2001, when mandatory nutritional standards for school meals were reintroduced by Tony Blair's first term Labour government. The first real regulatory tipping point came in Scotland, where a radical reform of the school meals service was proposed in the report *Hungry for Success*, which called for a new system of nutrient-based standards to be introduced as part of a whole school approach to healthy eating (Scottish Executive, 2002). The tipping point in England came later with *Turning the Tables*, a report on the development and implementation of new nutritional standards for school lunches that courageously contested the fashionable ideology of 'consumer choice' (School Meals Review Panel, 2005). Taken together, these two reports signal the most radical re-regulation of the school meals service since the founding of the welfare state and they carry major implications for everyone in the food chain: procurement managers, food suppliers, parents and children.

For many years *public procurement managers* in the UK have convinced themselves that they cannot procure food from local producers because this is prohibited by EU regulations, which uphold the free-trade principles of transparency and non-discrimination. In reality, these regulatory barriers are more apparent than real because the EU allows public contracting authorities to practice local sourcing in all but name by specifying such qualities as fresh, seasonal, organic and certified produce (Morgan and Morley, 2002). Consequently, one of the greatest challenges for the procurement community in the UK is to learn how to integrate new quality characteristics into a food tendering process that has been price-driven for more than 20 years – one of the issues being addressed by the Sustainable Procurement Task Force (Morgan and Morley, 2006).

Higher nutritional standards in school meals create new opportunities for *food service companies* that offer healthy options and pose threats to companies at the less healthy end of the market. Among the latter, Canterbury Foods called in the administrators in January 2006 because it was unable to adjust to the new public catering market. Its chief executive admitted that the company 'made a lot of fatty foods and a lot of salty foods. There has been a change in the whole industry. Unfortunately events have overtaken us' (Pavia, 2006). Even companies like Compass, one of the giants of the food catering business, have been damaged by the recent drive towards healthier eating in schools, another casualty of the zeitgeist sweeping the school catering industry.

The 'consumer' is the third stakeholder that needs to be mentioned here because the trend towards healthier consumption patterns is the most important determinant of the new era in school food provisioning. Given the moral and legal problems associated with the 'child as consumer', the 'consumer' of school meals

needs to be understood in a twofold sense to mean *parents and children*. While parents complain that they do not receive enough information from their school as to what their children eat and drink (Sodexho, 2002), a survey in 2002 found that only 27% of school children had been asked for their views on school meals in the last year – a figure that rose to 53% where the school had a food group, an encouraging sign tempered by the fact that only 12% of schools had them (Sodexho, 2002). The low involvement of consumers in the school meals service in the UK poses a major problem because healthy eating campaigns cannot be sustained unless both parents and children are actively involved in the process and learn to view and value food differently (Harvey, 2000). Children in particular have little or no involvement in the preparation of food at school, outside of the minority of schools that run food groups or that, as in Wales, are part of a network of healthy schools. If school meal reform is to be put on a sustainable footing in the UK, it will need to 'accept children as active social agents' (Gustafsson, 2002) – a step that, as the Italian example shows, is crucial to win the hearts and minds of consumers to the cause of healthy eating. The concept of *empowered consumers* is predicated on the notion that agents are knowledgeable actors who have the capacity to exercise *informed choice*, a notion that leaves open the possibility that consumers could choose unhealthy diets, but that they would be doing so knowingly, rather than through ignorance. In both Italy and the UK the school meals service is seeking to empower consumers through the use of more imaginative food education programmes, where the message of the classroom is echoed in the canteen on the basis of a 'whole school' approach. Moreover, the UK is now following Italy in the direction of controlled choice on the grounds that restricted choice helps to promote healthier eating patterns among children (School Meals Review Panel, 2005). The rationale for this approach is that informed choice presupposes some knowledge of healthy and unhealthy diets that must be *acquired* (at home and at school) before one has the capacity to exercise it.

Some conclusions

At the most immediate level, the different approaches to public procurement in Italy and the UK can be related to their different national food cultures. In general, the UK is characterized by a mainstream food culture that has little or no connection to regional and local spaces. As Sassatelli and Scott (2001, pp. 222–223) explain, 'agriculture in the UK has long focused on growth, profits and efficiency – the least-cost combination of factors relying on the substitution of cheaper industrial by-products for natural inputs'. Based on a 'universalistic and institutional' form of trust, this industrial food culture has turned the UK school meals service into a commercial operation that embodies the free-market ideology implicit in the old EU legislation on public procurement. However, as we have shown, this scenario is now changing in the UK, where a new consumers' reflexivity is putting pressure on national and regional governments to improve the nutritional quality of the meals served in schools.

In Italy, by contrast, the dominant food culture is rooted in time and space. With its emphasis on territoriality, Italian food culture is based on a multiplicity of historically based, regionalized and even localized cultural norms and practices. In a context shaped by this 'traditional and localized' form of trust (Sassatelli and Scott, 2001), a rigid application of the European regulations would threaten Italian national and regional identities, as it would separate consumers from the processes and sources of food production. Far from being considered as a commercial enterprise, the Italian school meals system is seen as an educational institution that promotes and protects the values attached to 'territoriality'.

In short, our evidence shows that while in the UK recent cultural changes in consumers' attitude are shaping new and more sustainable food procurement policies, in Italy the dominant consumption culture is shaped also by food procurement policies that promote healthy eating habits. This demonstrates that differences between the Italian and the British school meal systems cannot be explained exclusively by referring to their different food cultures. These must in fact be understood not as a passively inherited legacy, but as dynamic processes of interpretation that constantly create and recreate values and meanings in response to the changing needs, reality and aspirations of the present. In this context, the development of sustainable forms of food consumption is linked to both policy and culture; in other words, it depends on the implementation of creative forms of public procurement that successfully mobilize and integrate political action and cultural change.

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