

Organic food and sustainable procurement

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Sustainable procurement

Best value needs to take account of indirect as well as direct costs and benefits:

- Environmental impact
(resource use, pollution, biodiversity, landscape)
- Social impact
(working conditions, education, occupational and public health, rural communities, food quality, safety and security, animal health and welfare)
- Economic impact
(employment, incomes, multiplier effects, rural economic development)



Not just the procurement process

Sustainability needs to cover the whole food system:

- Farm inputs and raw materials
- Production
- Processing
- Distribution
- Retailing
- Home transport
- Consumption



Is local enough?

- Local food addresses local economic development by targeting spend on local communities and multiplier effects
- But ...
 - what about other communities?
 - does buying from local businesses ensure local production?
 - is local trade fair trade?
 - does local food address other socio-economic issues?



Is local enough?

- Local food addresses energy use through reduced food miles
- But ...
 - is there a trade-off between production and distribution?
 - are local distribution systems always more efficient?
 - does local food address other environmental concerns?



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Is local enough?

- Local food addresses food quality through freshness
- But ...
 - what proportion of food does this apply to?
 - is local food otherwise safer or of higher quality?



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Local PLUS

To make a real contribution to sustainability,
- beyond legal minimum requirements -
the acknowledged advantages of localising the
food system need to be supplemented by:

Environmental standards

e.g. LEAF Marque,
Organic

Food quality/safety standards

e.g. Farm Assured, Organic

Animal welfare standards

e.g. Freedom Foods,
Free range, Organic

Social standards

e.g. Fair Trade, Ethical trade,
Corporate social responsibility



Organic food

- comes from farming systems which
 - aim for quality, health and sustainability
 - operate to standards that address environmental, animal welfare, food quality and social issues
- is legally defined and regulated
- can contribute to sustainable procurement
- is increasingly available as more farmers convert
 - 5-10% of agriculture in most EU countries
- does not have to be significantly more expensive



Environmental impacts

- Greater biodiversity
- Conserves soil and water resources
- Increases soil organic matter (carbon sequestration)
- Reduces non-renewable resource inputs
 - especially fossil energy due to prohibition of synthetic nitrogen fertilisers and pesticides
- Reduces pollution and greenhouse gas emissions
- Environmental benefits widely accepted
 - organic farming is promoted by WAG and EU as agri-environmental scheme



The energy and climate change debate

- Substantially less (up to 50%) energy per ha
 - due to fertiliser and pesticide restrictions
 - mechanical inputs similar or slightly higher
- Lower yields reduce advantage per tonne
- Production only ca. 20% of food energy inputs – distribution 50%, consumption 30%
- Transport energy for imports may still be less than production savings
- Main focus for reduction needs to be on domestic transport



Animal health and welfare impacts

- Organic standards
 - Require outside access/free range production
 - Prohibit battery cages/feedlot systems
 - Specify minimum space and housing conditions
 - Prohibit routine, prophylactic medication, but
 - Aim to minimise disease pressures through management
 - Require treatment where animals are ill
- Some debate about whether animal health standards might also have negative welfare implications



Food quality and safety impacts

- More controversial - FSA position is that there is no conclusive evidence of difference either way
- Research shows some differences including
 - Higher levels of Omega 3 in organic milk
 - Higher vitamins and nutrients in some crops
 - Lower protein levels in wheat
 - Lower nitrate levels in leafy vegetables
 - Reduced risk of pesticide residues
 - No evidence of increased microbial or mycotoxin safety risks
- Further research justified on basis of current evidence, but too early to make procurement case based on quality and health issues alone



Socio-economic impacts

- Reduced occupational health risks
- Increased producer job-satisfaction and self-worth
- Increased processing and other rural diversification activities
- Increased employment
- Increased returns to labour
- Rural development potential recognised by WAG and EU in rural development plans



Role of organic food in sustainable procurement

- Organic food has a significant role to play in the procurement mix
- Even if the nutritional case is hotly debated, the environmental, animal welfare, social and economic benefits are widely recognised and supported
- Organic also covers food that cannot be produced locally, including Fairtrade fruit and beverages
- Including organic food would reinforce existing public sector investments in organic farming's agri-environmental and rural development potential



Making it work in practice

- Legally defined, therefore no specific legal procurement restrictions
 - Catering not yet covered by organic inspection procedures
- Not 100% overnight! Food for Life targets are:
 - 75 % unprocessed, 50% local, 30% organic
- Some commodities, e.g. milk, easier than others
 - Local organic vegetables more difficult in some regions
- Cost can be an issue, but doesn't have to be
 - Creative approaches to menus
 - Willingness to work with producer groups and other suppliers to shorten chain



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Organic Centre Wales can help

- Funded by Welsh Assembly Government to provide information on organic food and farming
- Supports school education activities
- Produces consumer guides explaining organic food
- Works with WAG to provide business information
- Produces trade directory on sourcing organic food
- Can provide training courses on organic sourcing and certification issues
- Can help organise supplier-buyer events



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