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Five key lessons from the EU City Lab on Public Procurement for More Local, Seasonal and Sustainable Food Systems

Intro

In the face of health inequalities, food waste and environmental degradation, cities have a key role to play in the transition to a more sustainable local food system. The EU City Lab on Local Food Systems #2, held in Liège (BE) from 29-30 May, was an occasion to learn from different cities' good practices, particularly related to public procurement in local food systems. Liège was joined by Milan (IT), Brussels (BE), Schaerbeek (BE), Haarlem (NL), and Linköping (SE) to share their insights and concrete examples to enrich the discussion around food system transitions.

The EU City Labs are knowledge-sharing events co-organised by URBACT and the European Urban Initiative (EUI). Each lab is a unique opportunity to learn more about URBACT and EUI cities' good practices in different thematic areas as well as how they can be adapted and transferred to other cities. During the two-day event in Liège, discussions framed public procurement as a lever to address the wider social, economic and environmental dimensions of food. This report zooms in on five key lessons that should be on any city's shopping list when considering how to transition towards a sustainable food system.

1. Public procurement is a tool for cities to address local economic, social and environmental challenges

'Public procurement' refers to the process by which public authorities purchase work, goods or services from companies. In his keynote address during the EU City Lab, Matthew Baqueriza-Jackson, URBACT strategic procurement expert, argued that beyond the bureaucratic and technical procedure, the process of public procurement can be a tool that cities can use to address economic, social and environmental challenges. For example, procurement can be used to create jobs, develop skills, reduce carbon emissions, and alleviate poverty and inequality. Cities "need to think not only about price and quality in the procurement process but also about how procurement spending can help to realise wider social and environmental goals". This approach is what, according to Baqueriza-Jackson, strategic public procurement is all about.



The cycle of Procurement developed by the URBACT PROCURE Network (Photo credit: European Urban Initiative)

Baqueriza-Jackson also introduced the concept of the **cycle of procurement** as a practical guide that cities can follow to implement public spending strategically. The cycle was developed by the [URBACT PROCURE Network](#) in their aim to pave the way for future URBACT cities eager to enhance their procurement processes.

If you are interested in learning more about the cycle of procurement, and why it is important for your city, take a look at a [series of seven tutorials](#) available on the URBACT website.

2. Public procurement for food: insights from diverse cities

The EU City Lab #2 on Local Food Systems saw the participation of several cities organisations and municipal representatives, including **ICLEI**, **France Urbaine**, **Manger Demain**, and the city of **Mouans-Sartoux (FR)**, which explained the need to address food in cities' public procurement strategy.

To say it with the opening words of **Peter Defranceschi**, **ICLEI director**: “Food public procurement can be a magic tool: it is a small plate with a big impact”. Food can have positive economic, environmental, social and health outcomes, by supporting small-scale farmers, promoting more sustainable and healthier eating habits, reducing emissions by transitioning from meat to plant-based diets, etc. “You can address all Sustainable Development Goals with a plate”, concludes Defranceschi.

Marion Tanniou, **Solidarity and Social Cohesion advisor from France Urbaine**, and **Marie Legrain**, **coordinator from Manger Demain**, used the occasion to present the [Freeing up Public Procurement of Food Plea](#), co-defined by several stakeholders, including France Urbain, the Cellule Manger Demain (Walloon region), the cities of Brussels and Mouans-Sartoux. The plea's main proposal is to renovate the European framework for public procurement in the food sector. It highlights that European sustainable food systems' regulation should integrate food not only from an agricultural perspective, but also from its environmental, health and security dimensions. By defining food as a multi-faceted topic for the territory and creating a certification that consolidates various environmental criteria, European law can simplify public procurement. The city organisations concluded that strategic procurement can also make cities more resilient by strengthening local food production, especially during crises like the Covid-19 pandemic.

EU City Lab participants also had the opportunity to see concrete examples from the city of **Brussels (BL)**, **Brussels Region (BL)**, **Liège (BL)**, and **Milan (IT)**, on how they include food in their public procurement strategy.

Municipal canteens, urban farms, educational programmes, and organic markets are only some examples from the cities on how they use public procurement to support local food production and promote healthier and sustainable eating habits. The Intercommunale de Soins Spécialisés de Liège (ISoSL), inter-municipal association in **Liège**, provides 4 000 meals per day to more than half of the elementary school canteens in Liège. **Davide Arcadipane**, **Cabinet Attaché from the City of Liège**, explains that, in three years, they have provided up to 70% of sustainable food and more than 50% of locally grown food to school canteens, hospitals, and elderly homes. Liège's food strategy for the future is making the school canteens 100% sustainable by the end of the year through the ISoSL structure and create a shortened supply chain in partnership with the Liège Food Belt (*Ceinture Alimentaire Terre Liégeoise*), a strong network of more than 400 local food stakeholders.

These achievements are the results of a profound change in the ISoSL food procurement process, including the adoption of new good practices in the field of collective school catering, as part of the [URBACT BioCanteens#2 Transfer Network](#). Arcadipane stressed that key to achieve Liège's food system's transformation was the municipality's constant dialogue and cooperation with an already well-established network of food stakeholders. In close collaboration with local producers, intermediaries, and municipal departments such as health and agriculture, the city has co-defined its food public procurement. This includes adding tender requirements for products that are environmentally friendly, respect animal welfare, are healthy and fair, and do not contribute to food waste.

Milan (IT) is another front-runner city in the field of food public procurement. **Milano Ristorazione** is the city's owned company that provides 77 000 meals per day, including school canteens. The city-owned company has carried out an important activity in including procurement criteria that orients the food market towards more sustainable practices. Public procurement is used by the city of Milan as a source of data to estimate the environmental impact of procurement decisions. Given the shift to plant-based and organic food (being 54% in municipal canteens), according to the Cool Food Pledge initiative of the World Resources

Institute, Milan has achieved a reduction of 34% of the total food-related greenhouse gas emissions, and a decrease of 35% of the emissions per 1 000 kcal cooked. Furthermore, Milano Ristorazione has defined a food tender including social, environmental and economic criteria, in which the food offer is selected not only from an economic point of view (which is given a less relevant weight than 30%), but above all from a technical qualitative point of view (with a greater weight by 70%). Some of these criteria include low transport emissions, short supply chains, zero Km, animal welfare, and gender parity certification.

Implementing a sustainable and innovative public procurement strategy can be challenging, especially in aligning the demand to tenders' offer. The **Region of Brussels** presents a good example on how it is necessary to educate both public administrations and local businesses to make public procurement more sustainable. On the one hand, the region assists public administrations in drafting sustainable specifications that are tailored to real-world conditions. On the other hand, it supports businesses in their efforts to meet the demand. The [Good Food B2B Facilitator](#), is a tool that the region has developed to link Brussels' demand for sustainable food with Belgian supply. The service can help Brussels-based buyers to find suppliers and identify their needs, find creative solutions to set up shared logistics with similar stakeholders, and help farmers find solutions for selling their products on the Brussels market.

The region's effort to implement good food practices is complemented by the [Good Food Label](#). The label responds to a request from Brussels residents who wished to distinguish sustainable establishments in the capital, and it is aimed at all types of HORECA establishments. It consists of mandatory criteria, including legal obligations like waste sorting and communication on organic food, and optional criteria. The label also provides procurement guidance to help canteens transition to sustainable food practices. It is beneficial for restaurants as it helps responding to customer demand, gives visibility to the establishment, and offers a potential cost reduction in the kitchen thanks to the adoption of "Good Food practices", including serving smaller portions to reduce waste, and the introduction of vegetable proteins.

3. Governance: building strong foundations for sustainable food systems

Transitioning to a sustainable agri-food system is complex and can present challenges. These include matching local supply with demand, accessing land and addressing issues within the agricultural sector such as the aging farmer population and the replacement of small farmers by large companies. During the lab discussions, it was mentioned that the aging farmer population is expected to reach 50% in Belgium in the coming years. Additionally, adapting public procurement involves complex logistics, particularly in coordinating efforts across municipal departments and sectors. Therefore, the cities of Liège, Schaerbeek, Brussels and Haarlem reiterate that a sustainable food strategy should have an integrated, horizontal and vertical governance. It is integrated and participatory as it involves the different actors of the food system, from local producers to consumers, and it is horizontal, as it addresses food from a decompartmentalised approach, including the cooperation of the municipal health, financial, planning and education departments. Food governance is also vertical as it includes different levels of governance, from the local food policy to pan-European food policies, like the [Farm to Fork Strategy](#).

Schaerbeek has a long history in the commitment to the green transition, especially in the field of sustainable food procurement. The city has been actively involved in several networks, such as the [URBACT Making Spend Matter Network](#), which explored how to use spend analysis as an evidence tool to enhance the impact of procurement by public / anchor institutions in order to bring additional economic, social and environmental benefits to the local economy and its citizens. Through cooperation, including the URBACT network, and city-to-city exchanges with Copenhagen through the [European Urban Initiative's City-to-City Exchange programme](#), Schaerbeek was guided to add a Sustainable Procurement Strategy Plan to the city's Climate Plan. The city recognised that implementing an integrated governance approach takes time and effort, especially in changing the work culture and convincing different municipal departments in working together towards a sustainable food public procurement, but despite the initial adjustment, this investment saved a lot of time in the long run by avoiding back-and-forth between political, technical and legal experts.

Brussels' [Good Food Strategy](#) comes again as a good example for governance. One of the strategy's transversal principles is a participative, open-ended, and co-supported system of governance. It entails a trans-sectorial and horizontal coordination, comprised of a Steering Committee Government with different (co)sponsoring Ministries, including the Ministry of the Environment and Energy, Agriculture, Economic Transition, and Public Health. Its governance structure also has a Participatory Council Good Food, comprised of stakeholders from the environment, economy, health, and welfare sectors in relation to the food chain. The strategy is constantly communicated through dialogue in an exchange network and the Good Food Community.

The city of **Haarlem (NL)**, presented their collaboration with the European Innovation Council, established under the EU Horizon Europe initiative, and the start-up Orbisk in an effort to reduce food waste in restaurants. The technology developed by the start-up used artificial intelligence to recognize the leftovers from plates, in terms of ingredients and quantity that is thrown away. After three months of collecting data, the six participating restaurants adapted their menus and portions, managing to cut waste by 20%. Haarlem's initiative is a good example of collaboration across different levels of governance. The city used the fund and resources provided by the European Innovation Council to identify and contract the start-up, and respond to the local need of reducing waste. At the end, the pilot offered a win-win solution: for the city's goal of reducing waste, for the restaurant that saves money and food, and for the start-up that gets support in developing a smaller product fit for the average small kitchens in Dutch restaurants.

Liège's approach to transforming its food strategy underscores the critical importance of collaborative and participative governance. The city begins its procurement process in the territory, tailoring its purchasing strategy to the offerings of local suppliers. However, Arcadipane highlights the complexities of integrating sustainable products into the city's purchasing strategy due to logistical and financial challenges, particularly balancing the demand for low prices from canteen users with the need to provide fair prices to producers. Consequently, the city collaborates with multiple stakeholders around the procurement table. **François Rouchet from the cooperative Coq des Prés**, representing 20 farmers, emphasised their role in securing procurement contracts, which constitute about 45% of their demand, and their efforts to diversify their consumer base through both B2B and B2C engagements. **Christian Jonet** elaborated on the Liège Food Belt's activities and infrastructure, which contribute to their market resilience. Overall, Liège's procurement strategy, rooted locally, involves a broad network of stakeholders from producers to consumers. ISoSL has developed its strategy in close collaboration with various municipal departments, including Financial and Health departments, dieticians, cooks from municipal canteens, and civic society members, such as children and parents from school canteens, who provide feedback on the menus.

The case of Liège stresses that a well-established food ecosystem, and exchange and dialogue with stakeholders across the food chain is crucial for helping the city transition towards sustainable food purchasing. **Vérionique Biquet, Project Manager for Healthy and Sustainable Food for All**, recognised that without the support of local experts and facilitators, the city of Liège would have not had the capacity to mobilise the local food ecosystem.

4. Discovering Liège's food ecosystem: inspirational examples

The collaboration between the municipality and the Liège Food Belt has had a mushrooming effect within the local food ecosystem. In parallel to the transformation of school canteens, various initiatives, such as urban farms and organic markets have emerged. During the EU City Lab, we had the chance of visiting some of these.

4.1 Urban farm

Not so far from the city centre, the municipality has entrusted a piece of land to Felicie and her colleagues to build the Les Pousses Poussent urban farm and transform a previously monospecific crop field into a vegetable garden. This initiative survives thanks to community-supported agriculture model, where subscribers harvest their own food. Besides providing fresh vegetables, it also strengthens neighbours' sense of community, as Felicie notes: "We feel like we are the gardeners of a little village. It creates social links and it is rewarding". Despite these efforts, challenges remain, such as ensuring sustainable livelihoods for urban farmers, many of whom live below the Belgian poverty threshold.

Farmers are not only crucial for providing the city with fresh products, but they must be included as key stakeholders in the definition of the local food procurement strategy. As mentioned above, Liège's food procurement 360° transformation started in the territory. Davide Arcadipane insists that the city has "adapted its needs to what the region has to offer, rather than the other way around". This includes systematic visits to local producers and dialogue between the farmers, and other stakeholders across the food ecosystem to define and implement the city's food public procurement strategy.



Group visit to Les Pousses Poussent urban farm in Liège – with Felicie, urban farmer and manager of the project. (Photo credit: European Urban Initiative)

4.2 School canteen

The ISoSL community kitchen is located at the bottom floor of the Valdor hospital, where 4 000 meals are produced every day for schools and the hospital. The transformation of Liege's food system was strengthened during the city's participation in [URBACT BioCanteens #2 Transfer network](#) (2021-2022). The network worked on ensuring the distribution of sustainable school meals as a key lever towards the development of an integrated local agri-food approach, protecting both citizens' health and the environment. Since then, ISoSL has modified public food contracts for schools, including adapting menus using organic, local, healthy, fresh and seasonal products, establishing work groups between the cooks and city schools, measuring food waste, and organising visits to producers to educate the kids and the cooks about the origin of food. Furthermore, Arcadipane outlined that since the adoption of social measures to ensure free meals to kids from underprivileged families, the number of children eating in the school canteens has increased from 10% to 30%.



Group visit to the kitchen located on the bottom floor of the Valdor hospital, where 4 000 meals are produced every day for schools and the hospital. (Photo credit: European Urban Initiative)

The example of Liège shows that municipal canteens are a good entry point to transition towards a more sustainable local food system. To complement Liège's experience, the city of **Linköping (SE)** shared their work on school canteens. The region around Linköping in Östergötland has a population of 430 000, with around 16% living in rural areas, and is home to 160 food companies. Through public procurement, they serve 25 000 meals daily, prepared in 60 kitchens by 250 employees. According to their food policy, the canteens, which offer three dishes per day, aim to have 80% of their purchased food produced in Sweden from local raw materials, and at least 50% locally sourced from Östergötland or neighbouring areas. These targets are aspirational and not enforced by EU regulations. However, Swedish law mandates free, nutritious lunches for school children. The municipality has reported that their procurement includes about 30% locally produced food, 57% from Swedish materials, 70% manufactured in Sweden, and 32% organic.

4.3 Organic shops

The visits closed with Les Petits Producteurs Cooperative, a cooperative supported by the Food Belt initiative, working in connecting Liège consumers to local producers and offering organic, fresh food. Since its foundation in 2016, the cooperative has rapidly grown to three establishments in the city.

Customers appreciate knowing the origins of their groceries and recognise the importance of supporting local and organic products. Even when products are sourced from distant places like Spain or Turkey, the cooperative ensures that the values and quality of these products align with their mission. Instead of negotiating prices with producers, they provide annual contracts based on existing products. In their model, producers receive approximately 70% of the revenues, while 30% is allocated for renting shops and paying employees.



Group visit to Les Petits Producteurs Cooperative, cooperative supported by the Ceinture Aliment-Terre Liégeoise (CATL), the Liège Food Belt initiative. (Photo credit: European Urban Initiative)

With over 500 members, the cooperative has a strong foundation for future operations. Another of the cooperative achievements, had been the opening of Bâtiment Horizon, a logistics hub for the *Pôle circuit* court dedicated to short circuits which has been operational for a year at the Marché Matinal de Liège. The building offers storage space for producers from 30 cooperatives from the Liège Food Belt, in particular to supply community kitchens.



Inauguration of the Bâtiment Horizon, a new logistics hub for the *Pôle circuit* court, where producers from 30 cooperatives from the Liège Food Belt mutualise some of their resources. (Photo credit: European Urban Initiative)

5. Cross-fertilising initiatives: learning from each other

Cities can learn much from each other by sharing successes and failures. The [BioCanteens#2 Transfer Network](#) has helped Liège achieve nearly 100% organic food in school canteens by sharing best practices with Mouans-Sartoux and other European cities. Similarly, Schaerbeek's participation in the URBACT [Making Spend Matter Network](#), and its cooperation with Copenhagen (DN) through the [European Urban Initiative's City-to-City Exchange programme](#) has helped the city to strengthen their local strategies and initiatives related to sustainable food systems, culminating in the adoption of the Schaerbeek Food Strategy (2024) and the inclusion of the Sustainable Procurement Strategy Plan in the city's Climate Plan. By participating in networks and collaborative projects, cities can adapt successful strategies to their local contexts.



Sharing cities experiences in Liège (BE). (Photo credit: European Urban Initiative)

Food for thought & next steps

This second EU City Lab on local food systems has underscored the vital role of strategic procurement, urban farming, and effective governance in creating sustainable urban food systems. By learning from leading examples and cross-fertilising initiatives, cities can navigate the challenges of modern food systems and ensure a healthy, sustainable future for their residents.

The five lessons highlighted in this report are just a snapshot of the exchanges and conversations taking place among cities across Europe. Want to know from other cities' good practices on sustainable urban food systems and food public procurement? Here's how:

-) Come to Milan on 23 and 24 October 2024 and join URBACT and EUI for the next EU City Lab on Sustainable Land-Use for Agri-Food. Registration is already open at this link: https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/EUCityLab_Milan2024
-) Have a look at the [URBACT Knowledge Hub on Food and sustainable local systems](#), where you will also find three online learning modules (modules on food public procurement are expected in July)

-) Stay informed and engaged with the latest developments and upcoming opportunities from URBACT and EUI:
- Dive into the [Third Call for Proposals EUI - Innovative Actions](#) targeting innovative projects focusing on: 'Energy transition' and 'Technology in cities'.
 - Learn about the [City-to-City Exchange](#), aiming at bringing together two urban authorities from different EU Member States to tackle a specific challenge related to Sustainable Urban Development, via a short-term, quickly implemented visit.
 - Remain always up to date by following EUI updates on [Portico](#).