

Institutional food procurement for sustainable diets and food systems: A policy instrument that benefits all

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Introduction

In the last decade various countries, regions and cities from low-income to high-income economies have been developing institutional food procurement programmes (IFPP) aimed at building direct linkage between public demand for food and local and smallholder agriculture production. Examples include efforts to link local food production especially to national school feeding programmes (i.e. home-grown school feeding - HGSF), but also linkages to strategic food reserves and broader food security programmes (Kelly & Swensson, 2017).

Despite an increasing number of studies across different areas exploring various benefits and beneficiaries that IFPP has the potential to achieve, the multifaceted nature of these programmes seems not be fully explored yet, neither by policy makers, nor by the literature. In the field of rural development in particular, the focus has often been on a single beneficiary (i.e. local farmers) and on specific benefits, frequently household income.

Building on the existing literature from different disciplines of knowledge and country experiences, this paper argues that IFPP present a multifaceted policy instrument with the potential to deliver multiple benefits to multiple beneficiaries that goes beyond food suppliers, to contribute to various development outcomes including more sustainable diets and food systems. It also argues that this multifaceted nature of IFPP still needs to be further developed.

Multiple beneficiaries and benefits

One of the primary recognized objectives of IFPP is to support local and smallholder food producers through the provision of new, stable and predictable market opportunities (Kelly and Swensson, 2017). The rationale behind these programmes is that connecting large and predictable sources of demand for agricultural products from smallholder farmers can reduce uncertainty associated with producers' engagement with markets and investment risks. This may encourage investment, improve quality and production diversity, leading to higher and steadier incomes and ultimately, improved livelihoods (FAO & WFP, 2018).

Nevertheless, IFPP can also constitute an important market opportunity for other actors in the value chain, including small-scale traders, food vendors, small processors and, food-based small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (FAO & WFP, 2018). Kelly & Swensson (2017) for instance report how under certain conditions IFPP can be a valuable instrument to also support small-scale traders that – according to the context – are poor and vulnerable rural actors. IFPP can also constitute an important market opportunity for SMEs, which may supply schools with nutritious processed food products as reported in the cases of Brazil and India (FAO & WFP, 2018). In addition, IFPP also provides the opportunity for government to target and support specific vulnerable groups of producers, including indigenous peoples, member of traditional communities, youth as well as women (FAO & WFP, 2018).

The beneficiaries of IFPP however do not include only suppliers. There is an increasing literature which demonstrates the indirect benefits that IFPP has on the potential to bring benefits to the wider community and environment. These benefits are based on the capacity of IFPP, by creating a demand for certain type of products (such as local, diverse food, from local and smallholder production and/or from environmental and biodiversity attuned practices), to influence both production and consumption patterns and promote changes that may contribute to more sustainable diets and food systems (De Schutter, 2014; Foodlinks, 2013; IPES, 2016; Tartanac et al, 2019). Tartanac et al (2019) classify these multiple benefits into three main areas linked to the pillars of sustainability: (i) Nutritional and health benefits; (ii) social and economic benefits; (iii) environmental benefits.

Discussion and conclusion

Considering changes in public perceptions on the choice of what food to purchase, IFPP has been assessed as a powerful instrument to increase the overall demand for more healthy, nutritious and diverse products and to stimulate smallholders to produce more local and biodiverse crops (Biodiversity International, 2016; IPES, 2016). Increased diversified production has been assessed as the most common and significant effect of the Brazilian IFPPs (Sambuichi et al, 2013) leading to an increase in household consumption of diversified and nutritious food, as well as to an increase of the availability of these products in local markets, contributing to dietary diversity and nutritious status also of the wider population (Valencia et al, 2019).

Regarding social and economic outcomes, IFPP has been assessed to have the potential not only to contribute to smallholder livelihoods and food security but also to generate important indirect economic benefits for the wider community. A recent study conducted by the University of California, WFP and Kenya's government on the impact of HGSP demonstrates large income multipliers in rural Kenya. According to this study, each shilling transferred to the IFPP created an additional 1.27 KSH income to the community with an increase of up to 38% in the simulated case of expansion of 10% of the food basket (Taylor, 2019).

IFPP can also target food that is produced in a specific way, and, therefore, use public purchasing power to support and promote forms of agricultural production that ensure environmental sustainability e.g. organic agriculture or agroecology. These programmes have been recognized with great potential to positively influence water and land use, climate change and promotion and sustainable use of biodiversity (Foodlinks, 2013; Valencia et al, 2019).

Nevertheless, despite an increasing number of studies exploring distinct potential benefits of IFPP across the three pillars of sustainability, there is still the need for a more comprehensive and holistic approach. There is a need for more research, stronger dialogue among the literature of different areas of knowledge and impact evaluation methodologies that take into consideration and provide further evidences on the multiple effects of IFPP as well as key enablers and constraints. This is important to support better evidence-based policies and improved outcomes.

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