

Public food procurement and diversity in short food chains

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The diversity of short food chains (SFCs) in France has been documented by several projects linking academic research and the civil society. Nevertheless, many public authorities focus on public procurement, even treated by national authorities as the core of the "projets alimentaires territoriaux" (PAT – territorial food projects), a soft procedure launched by the French Ministry of Agriculture in 2014.

This contribution aims at providing a critical point of view on this focus. Why do authorities remain shy, or self-restricted, to implement other measures? Research in law and grassroots studies show that local decision-makers can safely activate many tools for local sustainable food: access to land, jobs policies, food justice, urban planning, implementation of open air markets, etc.

At the national level, emphasis has been awarded to public procurement both by the government, through the incentives of the Ministry of Agriculture, and political representation. A law proposed by a Member of Parliament aimed at "locally anchoring" the food. The indicators were 20% of organic and 40% of sustainable products in public purchase for catering units, thus focusing attention on this path.

At the local level, public authorities electorally consider the loud echoes in the newspapers to measures for local, organic, sustainable food in the catering of canteens. A study in Brittany assessed the policies on local food led by local development institutions ("pays") between 2012 and 2016. It shows that from an initial wide range of actions, 3 types (awareness raising, lists of local providers and public procurement) were mainly implemented, and only the latter kept continuity.

Another interpretation can be drawn from a multi-level perspective. The citizens' growing quest for short food chains must be taken in account by the regime. Between the many modalities of SFCs, some fit more easily in the regime's frame and procedures. The catering of large canteens (from 1000 meals / day) is one favourable niche to take part in the SFCs' expansion with a minimal change in existing practices. Rationales on economic effects, though poorly evidenced, keep decision-makers convinced that procurement is the easiest and best way to "do something".

References

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