

Insight into Organic Education

iPOPY

The iPOPY research project aims to promote the prevalence of organic food in school meals. Senior Researcher, Anne-Kristin Løes, outlines the concepts of the investigation and the hurdles that it must overcome



What are the main benefits of organic food over traditional non-organic produce? Is there a proven link between organic food and better learning levels in students and is this what inspired you to start this project?

Research has shown that organic food reduces the negative impact on the environment. Several studies have proven that organic consumers care more about their health, and eat healthier.

In iPOPY, we have found that schools serving organic food more often have a dedicated food and nutrition policy. However, healthy eating supports well-being, and hence also pupils' ability to learn will likely benefit from organic and otherwise healthy school food. Organic school food may also inspire school food education, because of the holistic approach in organic food and farming.

Have you encountered any resistance centred upon organic food in particular, or merely to change?

There is definitely some resistance towards the implementation of more organic food procurement in school, and also towards public food in schools in general.

In Finland, people are proud of their local food and sceptical towards imported organic.

Further, the Finnish school food system is highly developed, with healthy, carefully composed meals free for all, and hence difficult to change. In Norway and Denmark, resistance is rather towards the implementation of more public food procurement in school. Danes and Norwegians stick to their packed lunches, and without infrastructures such as kitchens and dining halls, a complete school meal reform is very expensive.

Is there a demand for organic food in the school system? Has this project been driven by demand from pupils, parents and teachers?

In the cases studied in iPOPY, covering the countries Denmark, Finland, Italy, Norway and partly Germany, the initiative to introduce organic school food has rarely come from school actors. In Denmark, Agenda 21 has been an important reference for the public consumption of organic food. School actors tend to focus on curriculum, education and school budgets, and parents are generally a very difficult group of people to organise, as the group is heterogeneous and its members rapidly shifting. Pupils have seldom been active in demanding organic products; as a group with limited economic resources they tend to emphasise organic premium price more than their parents. However, iPOPY studies show that young people recognise the environmental qualities of organic food, and consider organic food to be healthy.

In 2008, a survey conducted in Copenhagen discovered that 25 per cent of school children did not eat breakfast and that 25 per cent of pupils did not eat lunch at school. How can the introduction of organic food change these statistics; is it not more important to educate children about the importance of a healthy, balanced diet?

iPOPY data shows that the introduction of organic school food is commonly associated to and embedded in an awareness raising process where a dedicated school food and nutrition policy is developed and adopted. An introduction of organic food should be followed



by changes in the school eating environment and teaching the pupils about sustainable food production and consumption, healthy diets and food culture. Such a whole school approach may gradually change the pupils' attitudes towards food, and develop their consciousness and encourage them to become aware consumers. iPOPY results show that organic food gets more popular among the children the more organic food is emphasised by the school and included in the school culture as something self-evident, but still clearly visible.

How do you propose to educate both pupils and parents about nutrition and the benefits of organic food? Is there still a general ignorance about organic food and can more be done at a government level, or is it important to focus on bottom-up development?

Bottom-up initiatives should be supported, but top-down approaches also are an important driver towards more organic food and more sustainability in general. Fiery souls are important, whether as a grass root activist or as a bureaucrat implementing a political decision, to support changes in dominating structures such as a conversion of conventional food procurement to organic. Enthusiasm is



SUSTAINABILITY AND THE wellbeing of our children are often considered to be the most important factors for the future. Yet we want food that is cheap and quick to complement our busy lifestyles but these offer little nutritional value. This may have played a significant role in childhood obesity levels and many links have been made between malnutrition and poor learning capacity in children.

THE PROJECT

The soon to be completed project, innovative Public Organic Food Procurement for Youth (iPOPY), aims to establish the feasibility of introducing a greater prevalence of organic food into school lunches, thus helping to support more environmentally friendly and sustainable agriculture, while contributing to better nutrition and long-term eating habits of school children in Denmark, Finland, Italy, Norway and Germany. This will enable the iPOPY team to assess the European relationship with organic food in the hope of increasing its popularity in the near-future.

The popularity and consumption of organic produce has accelerated in recent years and figures demonstrate that the rise is in line with the increased public awareness of nutritional needs and the benefits of a healthy diet. iPOPY believes that an increased exposure to organic food in public schools would help to foster a stronger connection with sustainable food production, as well as a better understanding of dietary needs from a younger age. The project not only promotes the introduction of organic food and agriculture to the child's plate but also to their consciousness and to the classroom.

CHANGING SCHOOLING TRADITIONS

Organic food could be used as a tool in the teaching of biology and home economics to provide a greater knowledge of current lifestyle issues. As Anne-Kristin Løes, the

required to overcome inevitable hindrances and difficulties. Determined and consistent educational policies towards sustainability as a part of an integrated curriculum to develop the community and society at large may be an important tool.

iPOPY is very sensitive to the individual cultures of different countries. Are there any particular nations that are world-leaders in acceptance and consumption of organic food? If so, what can be learnt from them?

Denmark is a leading country when it comes to organic acceptance and consumption. This may be due to the well organised, competent and competition-minded Danish society, especially when it comes to food export. Denmark has approached organic food and agriculture as a strategy to improve their status as an environmentally successful and conscious country. As a result of more than 20 years of committed actions, Denmark is now placed high on the global organic agenda; activists have cooperated with the government and the research institutions, advisory service and the food industry, and the shared approach has led to this success.

Organic Food For Thought

Attitudes towards organic food consumption are slowly changing. Could an increased use of organic produce in school meals and education help to encourage a faster acceptance? iPOPY researcher **Anne-Kristin Løes** explains how their research project can help



INTELLIGENCE

iPOPY

INNOVATIVE PUBLIC ORGANIC FOOD PROCUREMENT FOR YOUTH

iPOPY is one of eight transnational research projects funded by the CORE Organic 1 funding body network.
www.coreorganic.org

All iPOPY publications are found in the digital archive Organic E-prints:
orgprints.org/view/projects/iPOPY.html

COLLABORATORS

- **Bioforsk Organic Food and Farming**, Norway
- **Aalborg University**, Denmark
- **University of Helsinki**, Finland
- **University of Milano**, Italy
- **ProBER**, Italy
- **National Institute for Consumer Research**, Norway
- **Technical University of Berlin**, Germany
- **University of Applied Sciences Muenster**, Germany
- **CORE Organic network**

UPCOMING EVENTS

iPOPY Seminar

Bologna, Italy: May 27-28, 2010

iPOPY Final Seminar

Oslo, Norway: September 2, 2010

Organic Events For All

Oslo, Norway: September 5 - 8, 2010

Greening of Mega Food Systems

Copenhagen, Denmark:
October 14 -15,2010

CONTACT

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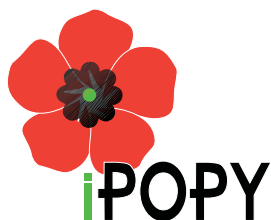
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coordinator of the iPOPY project, comments, schools are increasingly acknowledging these issues and have engaged with enlightening activities, yet are still restrained by the need to adhere to a set curriculum: "Farm visits and school-farm partnerships are gaining popularity, but such approaches struggle up against the much advocated opinions that pupils should always learn more and faster, and that the best way to ensure this is more education in basic theoretical subjects. Better knowledge and more publicity about interesting and successful cases will help to support 'green' development".

COUNTING THE COST

The other substantial obstacle to overcome in order to encourage a wider use of organic produce in school meals is cost. Organic products typically cost 10 to 40 per cent more than similar, conventionally produced products and this is a significant restriction.

Typically, schools have a limited budget which must be carefully apportioned, the majority of which is spent on improving learning facilities to meet high education expectations.

However, in some iPOPY countries such as Italy, organic food is consumed to a large extent, partially due to parents' financial support. Often school lunches are very much an afterthought or simply produced using conventional food, and subsequently have to exist on a small budget, thus considered to be ruling out organic foods. Løes suggests that a comprehensive adoption of and interaction with the production process could meet these demands: "A whole school approach, where the preparation and consumption of healthy, organic and delicious meals is a central and natural part of the school's activities", would be the ideal situation. "Food education should be a broad, interdisciplinary subject covering sustainable food production and healthy living. This would benefit pupils, parents and the community in general".

SENSITIVITY TO CULTURE

iPOPY recognises the individual nature of food culture in the countries that comprise its study area. For example, Italy has a long tradition of offering warm school meals and has also been at the forefront of serving organic and locally produced products through state and regional governmental policies concerning the provision of organic food in school lunches. However, other nations in the study, such as Denmark and Norway, have a history of children eating packed lunches and only participate in providing a service for children to subscribe to school milk and fruit. These attitudes take time to change but Norway has already shown a commitment and has pioneered a free daily fruit scheme in its public schools; an initiative which has now been adopted by the European Union. Denmark has shown a particular commitment as Copenhagen and some other municipalities have established impressive projects to utilise school food as an

important arena for green public procurement. Løes remains realistic about the potential of the iPOPY project and suggests that a measured approach would have a greater chance of success: "We recommend to start with some small steps that are then gradually developed further; do not initiate larger tasks than you are sure to manage and build your success slowly but safely, with patience. The main obstacle is the widespread opinion that organic school meals would be a completely unrealistic goal". She continues: "Organic school meals should imply a redesign of the whole school food culture, not only replacing conventional products with organic".

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iPOPY is aware that a universal policy would not be an acceptable solution and that any guidelines would need to be tailored to each nation and its specific food cultures in order to stand the greatest chance of success. Italy has demonstrated the viability of a local, sustainable organic network, whereby regional producers form associations with schools to ensure a constant and affordable supply of organic produce. This reduces the cost of transportation and processing and benefits the wider community.

Crucially, this research project does not demand that all non-organic foods should be replaced or banned. They simply suggest that children are made aware of the health and environmental benefits of organic produce and have the option to make a nutritious choice, while increasing the greater awareness of the benefits of a healthy lifestyle as Løes explains: "An introduction of organic food is commonly linked to an increased consciousness about healthy food in general, which is an important argument to foster organic consumption".

THE FUTURE

The research conducted by iPOPY offers a compelling insight into the European relationship with organic food consumption. Its prevalence and popularity hinge on the parents at present, but could be improved through the education of the next generation, as their attitude towards sustainability will shape the demand for organic produce and supply will follow those trends. While organic farming undoubtedly offers a far more sustainable and nutritious future, it still has many social and economic hurdles to overcome; certainly the work of iPOPY has demonstrated the social power that the younger generation can exert in shaping a brighter future.