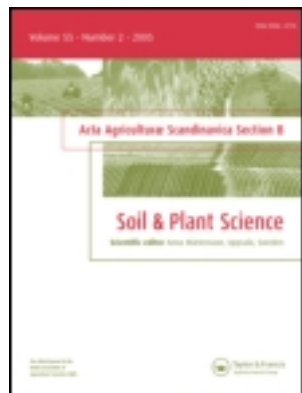


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### Food and sustainability: local and organic food in Finnish food policy and in institutional kitchens

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## PERSPECTIVE

# Food and sustainability: local and organic food in Finnish food policy and in institutional kitchens

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This article probes a number of recent national policy documents in order to capture how sustainability is perceived and expressed in the context of food and what role is given to the alternative food supplies. The goals of food policy and their realization are discussed by reflecting the results from the policy document analysis against the actual use of alternative food in the statutory municipal catering services in Finland. In the policy documents the concept of sustainable development has remained rather abstract; various dimensions such as food security, affordability and access to food, cultural and health aspects are mentioned, but these are not necessarily identified as elements of sustainability. Local and organic foods appear as important items in food sustainability. However, in the documents they are usually not differentiated from each other, and positioning of local food in relation to domestic and regional food is not clear. The municipal caterers instead, identify organic as distinct from local and they are interested in locally produced staple food products, but the (labeled) local specialities – locality food – are not relevant within the public catering services. Use of organic food is also marginal. Defining sustainability in the context of food is a prerequisite for coherent food policy. The development needs and possibilities are different in different municipalities, and the same approach cannot be offered to all, but the problems need to be addressed in the concrete situations. With the small population basis and long distances, it is worthwhile to aim at solutions relying on local resources. Food strategy should be included as part of the comprehensive municipal development strategies. It is important to involve practical actors in developing the food sector and in formulating quantitative goals.

**Keywords:** policy documents; food policy; sustainable food; local food; organic food; municipal catering services

## Introduction

Sustainability of food production is threatened by the substantial social, cultural and economic problems and environmental deterioration tangible at the scales ranging from local to global. The expanding global food trade has raised the severe environmental and socioeconomic disbenefits together with the questions dealing with justice, animal well-being and global food sufficiency into the public discussion. From time to time the outbreaks of food scandals have brought the problems in a very concrete way close to the consumers. Their interest in alternative food supply chains is growing, and contemporary consumer campaigns aim at promoting

sustainability by urging the consumers to seek options for the mainstream food markets (Watts et al. 2005; Wilkins 2005; Nestle 2006; Sonnino 2007; Levidow & Darrot 2010).

Because of the high costs of the mainstream food supplies to the environment and animal and human health the sustainability issues have gained momentum within the food sector worldwide. There is a growing interest in the origin of food and in finding sounder and more sustainable options for the present food production and consumption. These questions are to be reconciled within the frame of food policy, which deals with the aims and steering instruments of food production and consumption, and surveillance and distribution of the food markets.

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While the food choices of individual citizens are free to the degree enabled by the affordability and availability of various items, public food represents a rather rigid societal concept. Regardless the economic constraints of the municipalities, the status and procurement of public food are firmly based on legislation, and the meal composition and the health qualities of its ingredients are regulated by nutrition recommendations. Use of regulative instruments should therefore be also feasible also in public catering services “sustainability” as an important step toward more sustainable food systems.

Judged by the European standards, the statutory public catering plays an exceptionally important role in the Finnish food sector. It provides over half of all meals eaten outside homes, and the great majority, 83%, is at the response of the municipalities and the state; the rest being staff canteens in charge of the private entrepreneurs (HORECA 2008). About one-third of the population uses public catering services on weekdays, and all Finnish citizens are within its reach at some point of their lives (HORECA 2008). With the yearly expenditure of about 300 million euros on food purchases the statutory public catering is, thus, an important actor within the Finnish food sector (HORECA 2008), and can influence the production directly through the demand. The indirect influence is even more important; the food served within the premises of public catering has an impact on peoples’ nutritional behavior and on food choices in homes also, and contribute to the formation of enduring eating habits.

This article probes a number of recent national policy documents in order to capture how sustainability is perceived and expressed in the context of food and what role is given to the alternative food supplies, organic and local food, in food policy in general and specifically in promoting sustainability. The goals of food policy and their realization are discussed by reflecting the results from the policy document analysis against the actual use of local and organic food in the statutory catering services in Finnish municipalities (Mikkola 2009b; Muukka et al. 2009; Risku-Norja & Mikkola 2010). The aim of this contribution is, thus, to examine the articulation and practical implementation of the food policy goals regarding sustainability and food.

### **Conceptual foundation**

Sustainable development has been defined in various ways and one inclusive correct definition can hardly be presented. Originally, sustainable development was referred to as global societal process of change aiming at satisfying the needs of the present without compromising the possibility of the future generations

to satisfy their needs (WCED 1987). According to Lang and Heasman (2004) sustainable development deals with the human and environmental well-being, whereas the MEA-documents emphasize the functioning of the ecosystems (MEA 2005). Strong interpretation of sustainability stresses the integration of the ecological, economic and sociocultural aspects in the way that – instead of absolute economic growth – the economic growth and social equity should be secured within the carrying capacity of the ecosystems, whereas in the weak interpretation, economic growth is seen as the prerequisite for the realization of the other aspects, and it is therefore the primary goal (Ayers et al. 2001). The common denominator in all these definitions is the anthropocentric future-oriented approach: sustainability deals with mutual accommodation on the one hand of the human activity to the ecological border conditions and, on the other hand, of the ecosystems functioning to human activity in order to secure the survival of the future human generations.

The sustainability concept, thus, incorporates diverse dimensions and requires that balance is achieved among them. However, referring generally to environment sociocultural interaction, prerequisites of a good life for the present and future generations all over the world, the sustainability concept has remained rather abstract. When expressed in such grandiloquent but generic terms, the concept is not easily translated into action. Within the emerging field of sustainability science the need to operationalize sustainability in the context of some societally significant question is emphasized (Ehrenfeld 2008; DeVries & Petersen 2009; Kauffman 2009).

In the context of food and eating, the various dimensions of sustainability permeate the everyday experiences and natural biophysical principles. Environmental impacts of food production deal with impacts on soil, water, air, biodiversity and landscape, while the economic dimension is approached through questions dealing with subsistence and profitability of food production. The social dimension concerns welfare of the people involved in food production, and their working conditions, as well as food security and equity, health and nutrition and the viability of rural areas. In addition, food has deep roots in the culture, and eating is an aesthetic and socially unifying experience. There are also ethical questions concerning food production. Based on the overall sustainability definitions (WCED 1987; UN 2006; MEA 2005) and food system research (Lang & Heasman 2004; Gliessman 2007; Patel 2008), following criteria for sustainable food provision have been outlined:

- (1) Food has to meet both the nutritional and hygienic quality requirements.
- (2) Availability of basic food items is secured nationally and globally, and the decisions regarding food are made by local actors.
- (3) The producers receive fair compensation and basic food is affordable for everyone.
- (4) The food is based on domestic and local raw materials and it reflects seasonal variation and local food traditions.
- (5) Food production fulfils the ethical norms regarding the welfare of the workers, production animals and the environment.
- (6) The natural resource basis of production is secured and environmental impacts are minimized.
- (7) Food is tasty, the meals are composed by paying attention to the visual and aromatic harmony and they are served without haste in pleasant surroundings (FAO 2010; HM Government 2010; Risku-Norja & Mikkola 2010; SusFood 2012).

According to the resolutions of the Johannesburg summit, sustainable development is the common goal of all human activity and it should be incorporated into all policies (UN 2005, 2006). This means that environment, people and economy need to be coordinately accounted for in all decision-making and activity. Striving toward sustainability is also the foundation of the Finnish society. The government platform is the fundamental steering instrument in sociopolitics. Policy programs integrate various administrative sectors into preparation of specific tasks presented in the government programs, and their time span may exceed that of the government program. The strategies operationalize government and policy programs into concrete goals and they also contain a compilation of measures aiming at reaching medium to long-term goal. The government's decisions-in-principle are political takes that give further instructions regarding preparation of and guidelines for carrying out the tasks. Government reports for parliament are an account on the state of affairs of some specific questions; these are usually first debated in the committees of the parliament and the committee memorandum is then submitted for the parliament's acceptance. Action and promotion programs formulate the policy goals into concrete actions or pilot projects, and they also function as funding channels for the municipalities in developing appropriate operational procedures. The programs are planned and implemented in cooperation with broad-based expert working groups representing the public, private and third sectors. Ultimately, the programs are under the

responsibility of the ministries. Disquisition is an expert statement or report that has been commissioned for example, by a working group. It is used as background information in preparing other policy documents, for example, strategies and programs. Dietary recommendations, the adherence to which is voluntary, are meant to help planning of public catering and they are also used as the basis for nutritional politics and for civic communication.

### **Material and methods**

The analysis covered 26 national policy documents which deal with food, nutrition and sustainability either together or focus on one or the other of the themes. The analyzed documents are listed separately in the online supplemental material. The documents were chosen so that they represent different types of policy documents – government programs, reports and resolutions, as well as policy programs, national strategies, promotion programs, disquisition and recommendations – and at the same time, they represent various points of view and the most current understanding on the themes under consideration. The overall contents of the documents are constrained by the EU regulations.

The overall frame for food policy is expressed in the government programs (VN 2007a, 2011), decisions-in-principle on sustainable public procurements (VN 2009) and in the government report to parliament on food policy (VN 2010). Food is specifically addressed in the national food strategy (Food strategy 2010), in the promotion program of the Finnish food culture (SRE 2008), as well as in the dietary recommendations outlined for different target groups (VRN 2005, 2008, 2010; STM 2010; KeLa & VRN 2011) and in the documents on organic production (Organic strategy work group 2006; Kottila 2011; MMM 2012). Furthermore, food is one of the topics in the documents dealing with the overall sustainability issues (MMM 2002; VN 2006a, 2006b, 2009; Ministry of the Environment 2009, 2012; SITRA 2010; TEM 2010). Background information is provided in two disquisitions (SeTu 2010; Kurunmäki et al. 2012) dealing specifically with the food policy issues.

The study was carried out using the approach of qualitative content analysis of the policy documents using the ATLAS.ti application as the tool in analysis. The frame of reference for the analysis was provided by the criteria for sustainable food provisioning: using the following key concepts (1) healthiness and safety (2) security, sovereignty, justice and equity of food consumption (3) economic feasibility (4) cultural distinctiveness (5) ethical norms (6) ecological sustainability; (7) organoleptic

and aesthetic quality. The documents were scrutinized by looking for the quotations dealing with food and their linkage to the above given sustainability criteria. In addition to the outspoken sustainability expressions, the tacit references dealing with some aspect of sustainability, but without identified conscious coupling to it were looked for. The quotations were identified as dealing with problems, justification, aims, measures and impacts, and coded accordingly. The quotations were further sorted so as to refer to the different actor groups, farmers, medium-sized entrepreneurs (SMEs), public catering sector and consumers. The specific questions that guided the analysis were: in which ways the linkage of food to the sustainability issues is articulated in the documents, what role is given to the alternative food supplies in sustainability strivings, what are the goals and how they are justified, and what kind of measures are proposed for public catering for promoting sustainability.

The present status of alternative food in the statutory municipal catering services was taken as one expression of the Finnish food policy. The extent of the use and the caterers' experiences and views on alternative food products within the municipal catering services were compiled from several sources (Isoniemi et al. 2006; Muukka 2008; Mikkola 2009b; Muukka et al. 2009; Risku-Norja & Mikkola 2010; Kurumäki et al. 2012; MMM 2012).

## Results

### *Sustainability and food*

Sustainable economic growth is the overarching goal of the present government program; it is seen as the only way to secure the availability of the welfare services and to enable socially equitable development (VN 2011). Growth is sought also within the food sector (Food strategy 2010; VN 2010, 2011). The strategic goal of the Finnish food policy is to develop the agriculture and food production as a sector of strong expansion both for domestic markets and for export (Food strategy 2010; VN 2010, 2011). The domestic strengths of the food sector are promoted by focusing specifically on local and organic food and diversified regional production structure, on animal welfare and on reducing the impacts over the whole life cycle of food (Ministry of the Environment 2008; VN 2010, 2011).

In the documents, sustainability is often referred to only cursorily as the need to pay attention to its principles. The government programs aim at improving the compatibility and balancing of economic, social and ecological points of view within the decision-making of public administration (VN

2007a, 2011). The concept of sustainability, which embraces social, economic and ecological aspects, is sometimes expressed parallel to its contents: "Finland promotes the realization of human rights, democracy, principles of constitutional state and sustainable development" (VN 2007a). Some of the documents have very few statements on sustainability and they talk, instead, about "responsibility" (Food strategy 2010; SeTu 2010; TEM 2010; VN 2010, 2011). Responsibility comprises the same economic, environmental and social elements as sustainability and – like sustainability – responsibility is also used rather irresponsibly both as an aggregate concept and parallel to its parts by for example, grouping safe, healthy and responsible food into same category in the conceptual hierarchy (SeTu 2010).

In addition to the general statements on sustainability and sustainable economic growth, many of the documents stress environmental issues. The concrete measures to promote sustainability within the food sector deal particularly with ecological sustainability; the key concerns are climate change, the loss of biodiversity and the energy questions, clean water and the chemicalization threatening the environment and human health; decoupling of economic growth and environmental load is stressed (VN 2007a; Ministry of the Environment 2008, 2009). In the promotion program of sustainable public procurements, the sustainability concept has been consciously restricted to the environmental issues (Ministry of the Environment 2009). Strong emphasis on ecological sustainability is present also in the national food strategy (Food strategy 2010), in the program of sustainable production and consumption (Ministry of the Environment 2008) and in the proposal for its revision (Ministry of the Environment 2012). The need for economically viable solutions for environmental problems is emphasized (SITRA 2010; VN 2011).

Except for the outspoken sustainability statements, the documents contain abundant hidden linkages between food and sustainability. Such tacit references deal with various social and cultural aspects of sustainability.

The impact of nutrition on health is clearly brought up in the dietary guidelines (VRN 2005, 2008, 2010; KeLa & VRN 2011) and in the policy program for health promotion (VN 2007b). In these, the emphasis is on the nutritional aspects; if sustainability is mentioned, it is done only in general terms as an issue of its own that needs to be accounted for in developing food services; nutrition and health are not perceived as being elements of sustainability. The hidden sustainability statements deal with the axiomatic starting point of promoting health and

equity through public food services, as well as with the tastiness of food, the pleasantness of the eating occasion and its importance for social cohesion.

The issue of food security is addressed in several of the documents, but it is consciously linked to sustainability in only three of the analyzed documents (SRE 2008; SeTu 2010; Kurunmäki et al. 2012). Food security is defined as sufficiency of and access to affordable food to satisfy the needs of all citizens (Food strategy 2010). Regional production models are seen to improve food security and local well-being (SITRA 2010). It is acknowledged that, although the basis of food security is competitive domestic production, the food production is coupled to international trade through energy, protein feed and machinery; therefore, product-specific food security in terms of domesticity cannot be specified. The unavoidable integration to the global markets is also seen to increase the export of the Finnish food sector (Food strategy 2010). The need to improve self-sufficiency of protein feed and energy is, however, considered as important, and the need to adapt to climate change accentuates the importance of national research and plant breeding (Food strategy 2010; SeTu 2010; VN 2010).

Four of the analyzed documents paint a more comprehensive picture on sustainability. They stress sustainability of food as a source of comprehensive human well-being and environmental benefits (VN 2006a; SRE 2008; TEM 2008; SeTu 2010).

### ***Local and organic food and sustainability***

In most of the documents, local and organic food are treated apparently interchangeably without specifying what is local and without paying attention to the fact that organic production is strictly regulated by the national and international laws but with no commitments regarding the geographic location of the production (IFOAM 2007). Only the promotion program of the Finnish food culture (SRE 2008) and the two disquisitions (SeTu 2010; Kurunmäki et al. 2012) clearly distinguish organic and local food as own categories, and make an attempt to define “local food”. Food culture program concludes, that “local” means different things in different areas and for different actors (SRE 2008; SeTu 2010). The local food disquisition stresses the consumer’s conception regarding local food, and defines it shortly as food that has been produced within own province; more specifically it is “food the production and consumption of which relies on the raw materials and product inputs of own area and which, thus, promotes the economy, employment and food culture of that area” (Kurunmäki et al. 2012). Instead of local food, the other disquisition introduces the concept “food from

neighbouring areas” without however, specifying what this means (SeTu 2010).

Sustainable meal or service has been defined as a product of shortest possible supply chain or as an organic product or as a product that has been produced traceably in line with the responsibility principles (Ministry of the Environment 2009). The recommendation to increase the use local, organic, seasonal or vegetarian food is justified by sustainability grounds. Sustainability is seen from the environmental point of view stressing the need to decrease the climate impact, food wastage and the chemicalization of the environment and to promote sustainable use of natural resources and environmentally benign innovations (VN 2006a; Ministry of the Environment 2008, 2009, 2012).

It is, however, recognized that assessing sustainability of food products is not unambiguous. The increased transports, packaging and freezing, use of animal-based products and the amounts of food ending up as waste are undoubtedly problems from the environmental point of view (Ministry of the Environment 2008, 2009, 2012; VN 2009). The need to provide criteria for sustainable public food procurements is pointed out (Ministry of the Environment 2008).

The disquisition on food choices (SeTu 2010) intimately links together the environmental and human health and thus, takes the stance of Lang and Heasman (2004) on environmental and human well-being. In the Finnish circumstances this means that the preconditions of food production for and nutritional needs of own population are to be secured. Ecological sustainability is promoted by shortening the food chain; increased use of vegetables also complies with the dietary recommendations and would improve the nutritional status of the healthy adults. Environmental burden is relieved further by using domestic raw materials and food items, new green technologies and by exploiting the side flows of food production as crude materials in manufacture of fertilizers, animal feed and in other industrial branches. The document also presents calculations on decreasing the share of animal-based products in the diet and on substituting imported fruit with domestic berries and apples and the greenhouse vegetables with seasonal products without compromising the nutritional needs.

Even though “local” is left as an open concept, sustainability of local food is argued for from the cultural point of view and on environmental, economic and food security grounds (SRE 2008; SeTu 2010). Justification for local food can be found also in the natural resource strategy (SITRA 2010). The strategy does not specifically address food, but considers food production as part of the larger

entirety of bioeconomy. The decentralized production and distribution systems are seen to support sustainability aims, as they decrease the need for transports of natural resources, improve overall supply security and local well-being (SITRA 2010). The public expenditure used on locally produced and processed food is seen as an investment on quality, health and regional economy (SRE 2008). In the food strategy, local food is seen to support diverse production environments and local food security (Food strategy 2010).

### ***Aims and measures regarding alternative food supplies in public catering***

In the beginning of the millennium the goal for organic production was set to 15% share from cultivated area by the year 2010 (MMM 2002). This goal was not reached and organic production comprises today about 8% from the cultivated area. However, with the promotion program (MMM 2012) and encouraged by the vision of the country's brand working group on organic production contributing by the year 2030 at least 50% to the Finnish food sector (Country Brand Delegation 2010) marked growth is expected in the coming years. Also the promotion program for sustainable consumption and production visions a three-fold increase in sales of domestic organic food products both in retail and within public catering sector by the year 2020 (Ministry of the Environment 2012). Regarding local food, similar quantitative aims have not been presented so far; the share today is about 7% (Kurumäki et al. 2012).

The institutional kitchens of the public sector are obliged to act as path-breakers and as good examples in environmentally responsible food purchases and in increasing the use of local and organic food (SRE, 2008; Ministry of the Environment 2009, 2012). The significance of the consumers' food choices is also heavily stressed (VN 2006a, 2009; TEM 2008; Food strategy 2010).

The impact of the public catering services is seen as direct and indirect. As the purchaser of large quantities of food, the public catering sector can both save the environment by paying attention to the purchasing of the raw materials, meal supply and working practices and it can also pose sustainability demands for the producers. The indirect impact of the public catering services as an example and promoter of sustainable food choices is also acknowledged (VN 2006a, 2007b, 2010; Ministry of the Environment 2008, 2009, 2012; SRE 2008).

The goal was defined that by the year 2010 5% (one meal a month) and by the year 2015 15% (one meal a week) of the meals provided by the public catering units should meet the criterion of sustain-

able meal, i.e. the meals are based on local, organic or vegetarian or seasonal ingredients (Ministry of the Environment 2009; VN 2009). In the revised program for sustainable consumption and production, the time frame is extended and the goal is reformulated stressing the domesticity of food: by the year 2020 domestic organic products to comprise 20% of the food in schools and day care centers (Ministry of the Environment 2012).

The factors hampering the use of local and organic food and making the sustainable choices unduly difficult within the public catering sector include non-supportive strategic decision-making, lack of knowledge on purchasing procedure, lack of education among the municipal procurers, lack of managers' support, lack of practical tools such as for example, Internet pages providing environmental criteria, and underdeveloped purchasing process focusing only on price (VN 2010). The practical problems deal with the uneven availability and low degree of processing of alternative food supplies, as well as with increasing the purchasing costs (Ministry of the Environment 2008; VN 2009; STM 2010).

The measures aim at settling the legislative, informative and practical hindrances in use of alternative food and at securing decent resources both for food purchasing and for the actors' education (VN 2010). Regarding the price, it is stated that the benefits become evident in the long run, and sustainable procurements need to be encouraged through economic instruments; knowledge on the expected economic benefits due to reduced costs in health services need to be improved especially among the municipal decision makers (STM 2010). Communication campaigns, certification schemes and clear criteria for sustainable food procurements are concrete means to improve actors' awareness on environmental and health impacts of food. The need to clarify the procurement law by providing instructions regarding promotion of local, seasonal, vegetarian and organic food is recognized; the kitchens need instructions for the use of leftover food and in putting out tender calls with request for traceability and nutritional quality (Ministry of the Environment 2008, 2009, 2012; STM 2010). Adoption of the life cycle thinking in food purchases, optimizing the use of energy and water, decreasing the food waste and minimizing the climate impacts requires extensive informing, extension, advice and instructions, as well as quantitatively defined goals with planned schedules for their realization (Ministry of the Environment 2008; SRE 2008; TEM 2008; Food strategy 2010; VN 2010).

The role of the SMEs is acknowledged in establishing alternative food supplies a firm role in domestic retail and in professional kitchens, as well as in

export markets (SRE 2008; VN 2010, 2011). There is a need to upgrade the products and to develop small scale food processing technology (MMM 2002, 2012). It is important to expand the selection and to integrate the good taste, healthiness and environmentally friendly production (Food strategy 2010; VN 2011). The proposed measures deal with the operational preconditions and mutual cooperation of the SMEs. Emergence of shared marketing organizations is to be encouraged in order to secure continuous supply of versatile products and to overcome the logistical problems (VN 2011). Improved purchasing know-how within the public catering sector and inclusion of qualitative criteria in competitive tendering, as well as legislative procedures are measures to strengthen the competitive power of the small entrepreneurs and small-scale food processing (SRE 2008).

Fiscal and labor market policy instruments need to be implemented so as to steer the services of the staff canteens toward healthier options. Cooperation among the employers, employees, catering sector and the decision-makers needs to be strengthened in order to improve access and attractiveness of good quality food services. Attention needs to be paid also to the physical surroundings and to the timing of the lunch break. The solutions are to be sought at local level accounting for the circumstances and enabling the participation of the parties in planning the practicalities (Ministry of the Environment 2009, 2012; STM 2010).

The documents stress the importance of education and communication in formation of values and attitudes and in gearing the choices toward sustainability (VN 2006a, 2010; Ministry of the Environment 2008, 2009, 2012; SRE 2008; TEM 2008; SeTu 2010). The role of consistent food education in schools and children's day care centers and learning through positive experiences provided by the public catering services are pointed out (SRE 2008).

### ***Municipal catering services: use of alternative food and caterers' experiences***

The major target group of the public statutory catering is children and youth. Eighty percent of the municipal catering services concern children and young in day care centers and schools, whereas the catering services for the elderly people comprise about 10% (Risku-Norja & Mikkola 2010). The practical administrative arrangements are highly variable, the responsible municipal sector may be technical, educational, social, general administration or the responsibility is shared among two to several sectors of any of the possible combinations (Muukka et al. 2009; Risku-Norja and Mikkola

2010). Central municipal kitchen is very important; in nearly 90% of the municipalities it provides the meals alone or together with the institutional service or distribution kitchens. In about 10% of the municipalities the service is taken care of municipal-owned enterprise, but completely outsourced services are rare (Muukka et al. 2009; Risku-Norja & Mikkola 2010).

Although not formally required, the municipal catering services in Finland are firmly based on domestic products. Only as regards to fruit and to a lesser extent also to fish, the share of import is considerable. The caterers are also interested in local and organic products, out of which potato and other root vegetables, grain and vegetable products and fish are the most commonly used items. Seasonal products in season are favored. The possibility to buy them directly from the producers facilitates their use (Muukka et al. 2009; Risku-Norja & Mikkola 2010). The use of the alternative food within the municipal public catering is, however, modest; the share of the organic products is of the order of 1%, about the same as that in retail (SRE 2008), and the share of local food has been estimated to about 7% (Kurumäki et al. 2012).

The surveys and interviews directed to the municipal kitchen chefs and headmen of the catering services (Muukka 2008; Muukka et al. 2009; Risku-Norja & Mikkola 2010) have revealed the same problems as identified in the policy documents. From the caterers' point of view, the problems are very practical. The availability of the products for the needs of the professional kitchens is restricted. Packaging size and degree of preprocessing are often inappropriate. Availability is hampered because the products cannot always be purchased using the normal sourcing channels and even because of the failing reliability of delivery. Also the volumes of the alternative products in the markets are often small, and therefore, the use of these products is more common in rather small kitchens. One of the obstacles for the municipal catering is the comparatively high price of the products. With the alternative products the raw material price has gone up by 10–25% (Muukka 2008). However, price is perceived less expensive in the municipalities, where professional kitchens use alternative products than in the municipalities where there is no experience in catering (Isoniemi et al. 2006).

### **Summary and discussion**

One of the aims of the Finnish food policy articulated loosely in the analyzed policy documents is to increase the use of local and organic food, and the public sector is obligated to act as a path-breaker



(Organic strategy work group 2006; SRE 2008; Ministry of the Environment 2008, 2009, 2012; Kottila 2011; Kurunmäki et al. 2012). Another aim is to improve sustainability of the food sector (VN 2006a, 2006b, 2009; Ministry of the Environment 2008, 2009, 2012; SRE 2008) and still another and an almost overriding aim is marked expansion of the food sector, which is sought especially from increased exports (VN 2007a, 2007b, 2010; Food strategy 2010).

In the policy documents the question of domestic food security tends to be overshadowed by the emphases on food sector's growth and export. The goals of increasing the use of local and organic food on the one hand and the expansion of the food exports on the other hand, appear as an oxymoron. Confusion arises, because local and organic are mostly used in parallel. In addition, "local" is referred to without making distinction between "local food" and "locality food". "Local food" stresses the spatial closeness of food production and consumption, and it comprises also the basic food products, the staples. "Locality food" stresses the origin of food and the value added associated with it (Marsden et al. 2000); these are often labeled exclusive products targeted for international markets, and their consumers may be very far from the site of production. In general, rather than exporting food, the expansion of the food sector could rely more on exporting the food-related knowledge, technology and social innovations.

Local and organic food are given a central role in food sustainability, the justification being based mainly on environmental arguments (Organic strategy work group 2006; Ministry of the Environment 2008, 2009, 2012). Other dimensions of sustainability such as food security, nutrition and health, cultural aspects, organoleptic quality and food as a source of overall well-being are present in several of the documents as hidden statements, but they are not consciously linked to sustainability (VRN 2005, 2008, 2010; TEM 2008; VN 2009, 2010; Food strategy 2010; STM 2010). Perception of food sustainability appears, thus, to have remained as rather narrow.

Although environmental and sustainability issues are gaining momentum within the public sector (Mikkola & Risku-Norja 2008; Mikkola 2009a, 2009b), expanding the use of alternative food in professional kitchens is a slow process. For example, even though the *Steps to Organic* – training program<sup>1</sup> has been running now for about 10 years in Finland and it is well known among the caterers (Muukka 2008), the share of organic products in public kitchens is only of the order of 1% (MMM 2012). Half of the caterers in institutional kitchens expect

the use of organic products to remain as it is, whereas about 20% believe that the use increases, and another 20% believed it to decrease (Isoniemi et al. 2006).

The goal of increasing use of alternative food in public catering is clearly expressed in the policy documents (Ministry of the Environment 2008, 2009, 2012), and the caterers agree with this goal (Mikkola 2009a; Muukka et al. 2009; Risku-Norja & Mikkola 2010). However, the obligations set for public catering services to expand the use of local and organic products are cautious, and they have rather confirmed the status quo than contributed to increased use. The significance is in paying attention to the origin of food in the hope that eventually some kind of policy action is taken.

Several factors hampering the use of local and organic food in institutional kitchens have been identified in the policy documents over the past decennium, and the catering sector lists more or less the same hindrances in increasing the sourcing of alternative food supplies. However, the use of alternative food in municipal food services is still very modest. There are several reasons for the slow progress.

The hindrances are often practical and they deal with the increased workload and time consuming purchasing process. It is stated that sustainable choices should be attractive, accessible and affordable (VN 2006a; Ministry of the Environment 2008). The caterers are, however, often confronted with the fact that this is not the case. The appreciation of domestic food as pure, safe and tasty has slowed down the demand of especially organic products (SRE 2008). This may be accentuated by the unspecified and interchangeable use of the concepts local and organic in the policy documents, which may arouse confusion among the municipal decision makers. The caterers instead are well aware of the difference (Mikkola 2009b; Muukka et al. 2009).

One of the bottle necks is the procurement law and its strict interpretation. Because of the continuously shrinking economic resources the price has become in practice the decisive factor in public food procurements; the price competitiveness tends to override other aspects in food provisioning such as taste, freshness, environmental impact and therefore, limits the use of alternative food supplies. Although the procurement law is ultimately constrained by the EU regulations, there is room for reconciliation in regard to national needs. A more flexible interpretation of the procurement law and its adaptation so as to account for the specific local conditions is needed to allow the municipalities some degree of sovereignty

regarding the providing of statutory basic services for own inhabitants.

“Local food” is an open concept, and the perception depends both on the population basis and existing production structure, as well as on natural circumstances, which define the border conditions for primary production (Risku-Norja et al. 2008). Localness is therefore not a suitable criterion in competitive bidding. One possibility to favor products of the neighboring producers, is to split the bulk purchases; if the tender call is below the threshold value (30,000 euros), food items can be purchased without competitive bidding.

The quality attributes together with “combined affordability” are useful in competitive bidding, but they need to be constructed carefully for the needs of the specific municipality. The more labor-intensive small-scale organic production may bring along economic benefits in creating work opportunities both within primary production and in processing (Ministry of the Environment 2008; Food strategy 2010; VN 2010, 2011). There are examples in Finland that measurable and comparable criteria for “combined affordability” can be found so as to prioritize local products (Muukka et al. 2009).

The cost savings brought about by promoting healthy eating habits are an almost unexplored topic. The quantitative calculations could motivate to allocate more resources for public catering, which has an important role in implementation of new food culture by providing not only nutritionally balanced, but also tasty, high quality food, and positive social experience of eating together. The tacit food education of the public catering sector has already positively influenced the nutritional behavior of the Finns (Helakorpi et al. 2003). By the same token, public catering services are extremely important also in adopting sustainable eating habits (Risku-Norja & Mikkola 2010).

With the small population basis and long distances it is worthwhile to aim at solutions relying on local resources. It is obvious that recognizing the problems is not enough, but there is a need for a determined political will. Today, the municipalities are exposed to various pressures, and traditional sector policy is insufficient to respond to changing social demands. Wider strategic planning is needed, and the key challenge is to improve integration of environmental, health and food policies into municipal development strategies. The development needs and possibilities are different in different municipalities. Therefore, the same approach cannot be offered to all, but the problems need to be addressed in the concrete situations and regarding the concrete products in applying the criteria for sustainable food provisioning (FAO 2010; Risku-Norja & Mikkola 2010; SusFood

2012). It is important to involve practical actors in developing the food sector and their voice needs to be heard both in construction of the indicators and in formulating quantitative goals for the indicators when the food strategy is being prepared. This necessitates actor-oriented research and policies following the approach as presented by Long (2004).

## Note

1. The *Steps to Organic* – training program is a voluntary program aimed at helping professional kitchens to increase their use of organic products as means to support sustainable development within the catering sector. <http://www.portaatluomuun.fi>

## Supplementary material

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