



Guest Editorial

Introduction to the special issue on food procurement

Jennifer Sumner^{a*} and Lori Stahlbrand^b

^a University of Toronto

^b City of Toronto and University of Toronto

Food procurement involves the acquisition of food, often through a tendering process, whether in the public, private, or third sector. Within the public sector, food procurement covers a range of institutions, such as schools, universities, hospitals, and prisons. In the private sector, large corporations such as Google purchase food for on-site cafeterias. And in the third sector, non-profit organizations such as FoodShare and The Stop buy food for meal programs and cooking classes. The leveraging capacity of procurement is supported by the fact that public-sector catering in a country like the UK represents seven percent of total food expenditure, with the National Health Service being the single largest purchaser of food (Thatcher & Sharp, 2008).

The history of public food procurement can be seen as “a story of untapped potential” (Morgan, 2008, p. 1239). Private and third-sector procurement share this potential to unleash what has been termed the power of the public plate (Morgan & Morley, 2014). The sheer volume of food purchased through food procurement programs carries enormous possibilities for the evolution of food systems. As Morgan and Morley (2014) observe, food procurement is a powerful instrument for creating social, economic, and environmental change.

Many forms of food procurement involve transnational distribution and foodservice corporations, such as Sysco or Aramark. In particular, large public institutions have come to rely on the low cost and convenience offered by these global corporations, making it difficult for more localized small and medium-sized enterprises to gain or maintain a foothold in the world of procurement. This reliance means that, currently, much of the power of procurement is directed toward supporting the deeply unsustainable industrial food systems in which these corporations are embedded, “with their ‘placeless’ and ‘nameless’ supply chains encircling the world” (Goodman, Dupuis, & Goodman, 2014, p. 65). The consequences of such food systems are well documented

*Corresponding author: jennifer.sumner@utoronto.ca

DOI: 10.15353/cfs-rcea.v6i1.350

ISSN: 2292-3071

(see, for example, Albritton, 2017; Kimbrell, 2002; Weis, 2007; Wiebe, 2017; Winson, 2013) and can be understood as leading to an evolutionary dead end (Sumner & Llewelyn, 2011).

Using the power of procurement to move toward more sustainable food systems is key to avoiding this fate. The papers in this special issue provide a glimpse of some of the challenges and opportunities such a transformation would entail, and cover both public and third-sector procurement. On the public side, Michaela Bohunicky, Annette Aurélie Desmarais and Meghan Entz investigate food procurement at two universities in Manitoba: the University of Winnipeg, which has a self-operated food service, and the University of Manitoba, which mainly has a corporate contract for its food services. Using Holt-Giménez and Shattuck’s (2011) framework for reformist, progressive, and transformative change, they examine current developments and the potential for food system transitions at these universities.

In her article, Shawna Holmes looks at the changes to procurement in Canadian school food environments in response to new nutrition regulations imposed by the provinces. Based on extensive cross-country interviews and document analysis, her findings suggest that some schools were able to improve the nutrient content of products offered and include local producers and school gardens as part of the procurement process, while other schools struggled because of geographical location or logistical difficulties, and require support to improve student nutrition.

Jennifer Sumner and Hayley Lapalme investigate the tensions involved when public institutions are caught between conflicting policies regarding food procurement. These tensions create barriers to effecting food system change, while simultaneously creating opportunities to “think outside the box”. The authors argue that these tensions are symptomatic of a time of transition and offer a fresh values perspective for intervening in a system to steer the transition toward more sustainable outcomes.

Creating a community of practice around local food procurement for public institutions is the subject of the paper by Mary Beckie, Leanne Hedberg, and Jessie Radies. Knowing that scale is necessary to generate significant impact on the food system, they focus on the social infrastructure necessary to achieve this scale and describe an innovative community of practice—the Alberta Flavour Learning Lab—aimed at getting more local food on more local plates. They describe the accomplishments of this community of practice, as well as the challenges they encountered and their strategies for overcoming them.

Jennifer Reynolds and Beth Hunter explore how public institutions can optimize local sustainable food purchasing by reporting on the results of several case studies set up across the country by Food Secure Canada and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation. They offer lessons learned from seeking to change foodservices and procurement practices, and identify barriers and levers to change. Participants found common ground in the challenges and opportunities they faced, and gained insight by sharing knowledge and learning from each other about how to scale local sustainable food procurement up, out, and deep.

On the third-sector side, Jennifer Marshman and Steffanie Scott give an old concept new meaning when they investigate gleaning in terms of urban food recovery and community food security. Modern gleaning takes many forms, and one primary motivation of gleaners is to

donate the produce to local organizations that work to reduce food insecurity. Using both interviews and an online survey, the authors found that this innovative type of food procurement contributed positively to community food security and should receive ongoing policy and community support.

In Canada's Arctic, Angel Chen and David Natcher explore local food procurement strategies for combating food insecurity by taking inventory of community gardens and greenhouses as part of a circumpolar research project. This research provides an initial baseline of data that will help to determine how much community gardens and greenhouses are meeting the food needs of northern residents, with the ultimate aim of contributing to knowledge regarding the unique potential and opportunities for the Arctic to become a self-sustaining food-producing region.

Lori Stahlbrand presents a case study of the University of Toronto-Local Food Plus partnership to bring sustainable local food to the St. George campus of Canada's largest university. As the founder and former president of Local Food Plus, Stahlbrand identifies some of the community assets and communities of practice that must be in place, and highlights the role of civil society organizations in initiating and supporting shifts in conventional procurement. She makes the case that operationalization is worthy of serious academic research in order to understand the sociotechnical transitions necessary for a sustainable local food system.

Together, these papers open the door to the complex world of food procurement, both from an institutional perspective and from outside of institutions. The papers that focus on institutional procurement address the problems that large public institutions face when dealing with food system change and supply chain transformation. Those involved in this type of food procurement are working to effect change from inside the system, whether imposed from above or inspired from within. In contrast, the papers that deal with third-sector procurement address problems associated with communities outside of large institutions. Those involved in this type of food procurement are working from outside the system—seeing the system as creating problems and trying to find community-based solutions.

Both types of procurement found in this special issue can be understood as forms of social procurement, which involves “the use of purchasing power to create social value” (Barraket & Weissman, 2009, p. 3). Such procurement aims for social impact in the goods or services being purchased, with the potential to promote positive change in communities and vulnerable populations (Revington, Hoogendam, & HOLETON, 2015). Addressing food insecurity in urban areas or underserved communities, and providing healthy food for school children and university students, showcases using the power of procurement to create social value.

Both types of procurement can also encompass what is known as environmental or green procurement, which has been used as a policy tool to promote change toward sustainable consumption and production (Larsen & Svane, 2005). Green procurement involves the purchase of any product or service that results in a lower environmental impact while performing a similar function and “has been increasingly recognized as an effective means of addressing and reducing negative environmental impacts related to product production and consumption around the

world” (Ho, Dickinson, & Chan, 2010, p. 24). Sourcing sustainably grown produce for schools, hospitals, universities, and municipalities exemplifies using the power of procurement to create environmental value.

There is no guarantee that either type of procurement will contribute to more sustainable food systems, for a number of reasons. First, as Kloppenburg and Hassanein (2006, p. 420) explain, “we are embedded in an overarching neoliberal structure that shapes and constrains action in various ways.” This raises the question of whether ethical procurement or other market-based movements can actually achieve progressive social change in societies where neoliberalism has become hegemonic (Goodman et al., 2014). Sonnino notes that we are never wholly determined by neoliberalism, and “neo-liberal values and governance contexts do not necessarily disempower and immobilise the local” (Sonnino, 2010, p. 28). As Antonio Gramsci (in Coben, 1998) observed, hegemony is always contested. While neoliberalism can indeed narrow the ‘politics of the possible’ and frame solutions within a neoliberal purview (Guthman, 2008), it is clear that some of these papers portray forms of procurement and purchasing policies that can be understood as “struggling to articulate an alternative to capitalism while working within capitalist contexts” (McMurtry, 2014, p. S26). Using the third sector to procure food for precarious communities, sharing gleaned food, and setting standards that go way beyond so-called ‘best value’ illustrate possibilities outside the realm of neoliberal capitalism.

Second, as Morgan (2008, p. 1248) warns, sustainable public procurement can be hampered by a “pious and self-referential localism in which the local is always extolled over the global.” In contrast, he proposes, a sustainable food strategy would involve “a judicious combination of ‘local and green’ and ‘global and fair’.” While all of the papers in this special issue mention procurement projects that are striving to increase local sustainable food purchasing, none of the papers mentions engaging in fair trade or making alliances with organizations outside the region or the country to exchange sustainably produced food. Setting up links with other like-minded organizations and creating regional and global networks of fairly traded and sustainably produced foodstuffs is the next frontier for food procurement.

Third, and relatedly, local is not inherently sustainable. Such an assumption simply conflates spatial relations with social relations (Goodman et al., 2014). Following Born and Purcell (2006), whether local procurement can support sustainable food systems depends on the agenda of those who are empowered by the local scale. If their agenda is endless capital accumulation above all else, then the local food system will mirror the unsustainable global food system. But if their agenda is to change the food system and transform supply chains in a more sustainable direction, then local will become more sustainable. The agenda of those involved in the food procurement studies for this special issue does not entail using local as a vehicle for capital accumulation, but as a vehicle for community development, public health, and environmental integrity. Such procurement opens the door to more sustainable food systems.

And, fourth, institutional food procurement highlights one of the biggest problems in our current food system—cheap food. Patel and Moore (2017) describe cheapness as a set of strategies for temporarily fixing the crises of capitalism that are used to manage the relationships

between capitalism and what they describe as the web of life. For these authors, cheap is not equivalent to low cost. Although it includes low cost, it is essentially “a strategy, a violence that mobilizes all kinds of work—human and animal, botanical and geological—with as little compensation as possible” (22). Roberts (2013) describes cheap food as an elaborate ‘buy now, pay later’ sales scheme with hidden costs: crippling world cultures, contributing to poor health, inducing poverty in farmers and food workers, damaging the environment, and wasting and adulterating food. In the words of Jane Goodall (2005, p. 169), “we just cannot afford this ‘cheap’ food much longer.” In terms of food procurement, as long as institutions (including hospitals, drop-in centres, and places that serve the disadvantaged) are not properly funded so as to be able to purchase food that is nutritious and produced in ways that support justice for all, they are forced to buy cheap food produced through the exploitation of people, animals and the environment.

All of the papers in this special issue broach the ‘politics of the possible’ within neoliberal capitalism for procurement that aims to contribute to more sustainable food systems. Although most of the cases operate within the market, in practice they disrupt existing power in the food system and point toward a more sustainable path. Those cases that are not market-based offer glimpses of a not-for-profit food system, where food is no longer a profitable commodity in a deeply unsustainable global food system, but a human right that everyone can exercise.

Acknowledgments: The guest editors would like to acknowledge the work of the editorial team at *Canadian Food Studies*. Without their guidance and support, this special issue would still be an unrealized idea. In particular, we would like to thank Ellen Desjardins for her leadership and incisive decision-making, and Alyson Holland for her dedication as lead editor for this issue, and for her professional editorial work.

References

- Albritton, R. (2017). Two great food revolutions: The domestication of nature and the transgression of nature’s limits. In M. Koç, J. Sumner and A. Winson (Eds.), *Critical perspectives in food studies* (2nd edition) (pp. 108-117). Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Barraket, J., & Weissman, J. (2009). *Social procurement and its implications for social enterprise: A literature review*. The Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies, Queensland University of Technology. Retrieved 22 August, 2017 from https://eprints.qut.edu.au/29060/1/Barraket_and_Weissmann_2009_Working_Paper_No_48_Final.pdf
- Born, B., & Purcell, M. (2006). Avoiding the local trap: Scale and food systems in planning research. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 26(2), 195-207.
- Coben, D. (1995). Revisiting Gramsci. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 27(1), 36-51.
- Goodall, J. (2005). *Harvest for hope: A guide to mindful eating*. New York: Warner Books.

- Goodman, D., DuPuis, E. M., & Goodman, M. K. (2014) *Alternative food networks: Knowledge, practice, and politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Guthman, J., (2008). Neoliberalism and the making of food politics in California. *Geoforum*, 39, 1171-1183.
- Ho, L.W.P., Dickinson, N.M., & Chan, G.Y.S. (2010). Green procurement in the Asian public sector and the Hong Kong private sector. *Natural Resources Forum*, 34, 24-38.
- Holt Giménez, E., & Shattuck, A. (2011). Food crises, food regimes and food movements: Rumbblings of reform or tides of transformation. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38(1), 109-144.
- Kimbrell, A. (Ed.) (2002). *The fatal harvest reader: The tragedy of industrial agriculture*, Washington: Island Press.
- Kloppenburg, Jr. J., & Hassanein, N. (2006). From old school to reform school. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 23(4), 417-421.
- Larsen, K., & Svane, Ö. (2005). *Routines and communities of practice in public environmental procurement processes*. Paper No. 44, CESIS Electronic Working Paper Series, Centre of Excellence for Science and Innovation Studies, Sweden. Retrieved 8/10/2017 from <https://static.sys.kth.se/itm/wp/cesis/cesiswp44.pdf>
- McMurtry, J.J. (2014). The political economy of procurement. *Canadian Public Policy*, 40(Supp. 1), S26-S38.
- Morgan, K. (2008). Greening the realm: sustainable food chains and the public plate. *Regional Studies*, 42(9), 1237-1250.
- Morgan, K., & Morley, A. (2014). The public plate: Harnessing the power of purchase. In T. Marsden & A. Morley (Eds.), *Sustainable food systems: Building a new paradigm* (pp. 84-102). New York: Routledge.
- Patel, R., & Moore, J. W. (2017). *A history of the world in seven cheap things: A guide to capitalism, nature, and the future of the planet*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Revington, C., Hoogendam, R., & HOLETON, A. (2015). *The social procurement intermediary: The state of the art and its development within the GTHA*. Metcalf Foundation/Social Enterprise Toronto/Learning Enrichment Foundation. Retrieved August 22, 2017 from <http://lefca.org/documents/Social-Procurement-Intermediary-LEF-2015.pdf>
- Roberts, W. (2013). *The no-nonsense guide to world food* (2nd edition). Toronto: New Internationalist/Between the Lines.
- Sonnino, R. (2010). Escaping the local trap: Insights on re-localisation from school meal reform. *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*, 12(1), 23-40.
- Sumner, J., & Llewelyn, S. (2011). Organic solutions? Gender and organic farming in the age of industrial agriculture. *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 22(1), 100-118.
- Thatcher, J., & Sharp. K. (2008). Measuring the local economic impact of National Health Service procurement in the UK: an evaluation of the Cornwall Food Programme and LM3. *Local Environment*, 13(3), 253-270.

- Weis, T. (2007). *The global food economy: The battle for the future of farming*. London: Zed Books.
- Wiebe, N. (2017) Crisis in the food system: the farm crisis. In M. Koç, J. Sumner & A. Winson (Eds.). *Critical perspectives in food studies*, 2nd Edition (pp. 138-153). Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Winson, A. (2013). *The industrial diet: The degradation of food and the struggle for healthy eating*. Vancouver: UBC Press.